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RED TOWERS

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen

1889

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RED TOWERS

PART I.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XIII.

A SPOILT CHILD.

‘THAT evening—that was the last happy evening of my life,’ said Antoinette, long after, to somebody who was very fond of her.

‘Don’t say that, dear,’ said her friend.

‘I mean—till now,’ she said, and no one could be dissatisfied with the answer.

In those days no child of ten could be more thoroughly childish than she, though even then she had her full share of womanly good sense and reasonableness. And in after days, in hours that would have tried some natures sorely, she did not lose much of her child-likeness, or of her good sense; but then the possibilities of the future had not even occurred to her; when she left her reverend mothers that day, and came to La Tour Blanche with her father, it was all to her 'the wild freshness of morning.' Her father, Suzanne, and her old home—what more was wanted to make life perfect? That was indeed a happy evening, and for a finishing touch, just at sunset, beautiful gleams of yellow light darted out from under the thick curtain of grey clouds, and laid soft shadows all about the old precincts of the château, and gave a topaz shine to

the west windows of the tower. Mdlle. Antoinette could have believed that they were lighted up from inside, as she saw them from the plantation below. Suzanne did not like her to say that, and crossed herself at the notion.

There was really a good deal to do that evening. One must just poke one's head into every room in the house, however dark, damp, or unfurnished, to see whether there were any alterations ; and one must go into the kitchen, where there were really a row of new copper pans, and some very nice bunches of herbs hanging up to dry, and a smiling young cook, imported from Saint-Bernard for the occasion, and two or three old friends in sabots and blue gowns and cotton caps, looking in with rugged old brown faces to see mademoiselle. Then out at the back, where the grass grew

long and wild in the old *plaisance*, there were chickens and geese to be visited, and away along a shady walk there was Antoinette's own garden, which wanted so much digging and arranging that it must be put off till to-morrow. Then it was most necessary to inspect the chapel, which Suzanne had already decorated for Mass to-morrow morning. In fact, all the young *châtelaine's* work was hardly done when it was time to brush her curls for dinner, and tie them round with a blue ribbon, and array her small person in a large white pinafore. Then she danced downstairs into the salon, sparkling with life and beauty and fun, to join her father, who had been inspecting on his own account; and together they went into the brown polished dining-room, where the little cook from Saint-Bernard sent them in a dinner worthy of

Paris, and old Pierre waited on them, very much to his own satisfaction. If Antoinette had not been quite so happy herself, she might have noticed that her father was a little silent: but that evening nothing troubled her. Suzanne had something serious to say to Pierre in the pantry, when she was helping him to put the things away after dinner.

‘My friend,’ said she, ‘I was down in the new wood with mademoiselle this evening, and the windows of the apartment of Madame la Marquise were illuminated.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Pierre, contemptuous.

‘You laugh, and you tell me it is the sun, no doubt. Men like you always do. The child said they looked as if they were lighted from inside, and so they did. And you won’t pretend to forget when they *were*

lighted up inside, and you and I saw them from the end of the avenue, when we had run down to look at the triumphal arch. And we had only just time to get back, to receive our young mistress, and all her windows were lighted up to welcome her. Fifteen years ago, Master Pierre. We were younger then than we are now, and I had not done the foolishness of marrying you.'

'Bah! what does the woman mean!' Pierre tried to keep up his scornful airs, but failed a little before the solemn sincerity of his wife's eyes. 'Well, well,' he said, 'I suppose you take it for a sign, do you, that M. le Marquis is going to be married again.'

'*Dame!* Don't talk so loud.'

'I'm whispering. Well—and if he is?'

'Mon Dieu! you don't think it likely, do you?'

‘Stranger things might happen,’ said Pierre, with the air of an oracle. ‘I may tell you, I needed no illumination to put it into *my* head. He has been walking all over the place, and finding fault with things he never noticed before. Pommard told me so. He is either going to marry or to sell the place.’

‘Sell it! Impossible!’

‘*Va!*’ said Pierre. ‘Has that woman made the coffee?’

Under the great chimney of the salon a fire of logs was flaming; in the uncertain light of this, and one dim lamp, the bare old room looked its best. The Marquis and his little daughter sat opposite to each other in two high arm-chairs beside the fire; here and there, above their heads, a point of colour or tarnished gilding shone out from the tall emblazoned chimney-

piece. All the ceiling was crossed by dark painted beams ; the walls were also painted, and hung with a few dismal old pictures ; and by this light one did not see the yawning cracks and blisters in the faded paint, or the great damp stains on the wall.

M. de Montmirail was trying to read the *Gaulois* by the combined light of fire and lamp, which shone very becomingly on his handsome fair head, but was hardly satisfactory in the matter of reading. Antoinette sat smiling and looking about her. The chair was much too high for her, and her little feet were cocked up on a footstool ; she looked at them, then at the fire, then round the room, and then settled down into a prolonged gaze at her father, who presently threw the paper aside with an impatient exclamation :

‘ Pierre might have done something better for us in the way of light,’ he said.

‘ Never mind, papa : talk to me,’ said Antoinette.

‘ What do you want to talk about, chatterbox ? You look very dignified in that large chair. Madame de Cernay will be quite impressed, if you sit up like that to entertain her to-morrow.’

‘ I don’t think I care for Madame de Cernay ; not passionately, at least.’

‘ Not passionately,’ he repeated, smiling. ‘ Who cares passionately for anybody or anything ? Not you or I. You need not use such strong words, *petite*.’

‘ Pardon !’ said Antoinette quickly. ‘ I care passionately for this place, and for you, and for living here with you. The word is not too strong for me. To me it is *ravis-sant*, *ravissant* to the very utmost height,

to sit here in this chair and see you in that one. It is all in life that is most exquisite.'

'*Merci, petite,*' he said, smiling, and very gently ; but there was some shadow of trouble in his eyes.

'Yes, an evening like this is all right ; it is perfection ; it is what ought always to be,' the girl went on. 'Do you know, papa, once upon a time I had a great fear.'

'What was it?' he asked, looking up quickly.

'Don't be frightened, dearest,' she said. 'It is long ago now. It was when you were staying in England with our cousins. You said in your letters that you liked England so much, and all the people there. I was afraid that you would wish to live in England ; and I told grandmamma, and she

was a little afraid too. But she said England was really so terrible that she could not believe it ; only to be sure she thought that you had little eccentric fancies sometimes, dear papa.'

'It is a charming country, and I met charming people there,' said the Marquis. 'I should like to take you there some day for a visit. You can talk English a little, and Lady Lefroy would be very kind to you. But as to living there—no, one is best in one's own country.'

'Do you remember the little Englishman whose name was Romaine, who spent Sunday with you on a hill ?'

The Marquis laughed. 'Of course I remember him. He was a very nice fellow. But why do you call him "little" ? He was nearly as tall as I am.'

'Is it possible ? Grandmamma and I made

a picture of you walking side by side, and he was very much the smallest.'

'You never showed me that work of art, or I could have corrected you.'

'It was not worth while. Will you ask that Englishman to stay with you, when the house is restored, and we are living here together?'

'Why? Do you want to see him?'

'Of course I want to see him. I want to like everybody you like. And I think we agree very well, for I know you like M. de Cernay better than madame, just as I do. And I can never go to England, because of that dreadful sea. Oh, I should die of fear!'

'Let us hope that some day you will find a little courage,' said M. de Montmirail.

He was certainly unlike himself that evening, a little disturbed from his usual frank

placidity. His talk with Antoinette had lost something of its old intimate charm ; the touch of perfect sympathy and mutual understanding was somehow absent, though she was not aware of it : she idolized him far too thoroughly to be critical.

He presently got up, and walked along the room two or three times, from the door into the hall to the door into the dining-room. Antoinette watched him silently for a minute or two, and then sprang from her chair and joined him.

‘ Why do you march up and down ? ’ she said, ‘ and what are you thinking about ? I must march with you, and you must tell me. ’

Achille smiled, and took one more turn with the small hand in his arm. He could not tell her what he was thinking of : no, not that evening ; every word the child said made it harder.

‘Come, let us play a game of tric-trac,’ he said. ‘And then, mademoiselle, you must go to bed. What will your grandmother say, if you don’t have your proper sleep at La Tour Blanche? And she will find it out at the first glance. As for me, I shall never hear the end of it.’

It was the custom at La Tour Blanche for the Curé of the village to celebrate Mass, once a year, in the chapel at the château; the day was a day in November, the anniversary of the last Marquis’s death. It was, therefore, with this service for the repose of her grandfather’s soul that little Antoinette de Montmirail began the next day.

Her father made a point of being there every year, and she had often been with him; but never, she thought, had the solemnity of the service been so real to her as on that morning. Her father was always a good

man, and a good Catholic ; perhaps it was because she was older, and more able to understand things, but she felt that day, as she knelt beside him, as if his devotion was deeper than she had ever known it before. It was indeed happiness to kneel beside him, even at such a sad service as this ; to feel that she belonged to him just as he belonged to the dear grandfather who was dead.

People who were at all *dilettante* in religion might have been distressed by the rough, inharmonious tones of the good Curé's voice, which suited ill with his vestments of black velvet and silver lace. The blue blouse and corduroy trousers of his acolyte were also a little out of keeping : but neither M. de Montmirail, his daughter, nor the servants who knelt behind them in the little old vaulted chapel were disposed to be at all

critical on these subjects. Their religion was too much a part of their life to be the least troublesome, or anything but simple.

The Mass was said, the duty was done, and that was enough for them. And all the time, a background to the Curé's chanting, a thick, dark November rain descended steadily, running in a stream down the stone steps outside, and making its way to lie in little pools under the rugged old chapel door.

When Mass was over, Mdlle. Antoinette darted across the archway and danced into the kitchen, where Suzanne made her sit down by the stove, and took her wet shoes off. Several attractive pots were stewing on the stove, with a view to the breakfast of monsieur and mademoiselle, also of M. le Curé, and of Monsieur and Madame de Cernay, if the day was not too wet for them.

In the meanwhile the Curé, who had tucked up his *soutane*, and carried a large umbrella, was talking to M. de Montmirail over a comfortable blaze in the salon. The cracked and discoloured paint, the damp with which the walls were stained, the rickety windows, the faded, heavy, ugly furniture, the absence of curtains, portières, tapestries, comfort or luxury of any kind, all were far more sadly conspicuous now than in the evening ; and Madame de Cernay, who drove up cheerfully with her husband in a small omnibus through all the rain, threw up her hands and screamed with laughter when M. de Montmirail smilingly welcomed her to his ruin.

‘ Ruin indeed, my dear Marquis ! ’ she cried. ‘ We must take this into our calculations very carefully. ’

But if Madame de Cernay was uncomplimentary towards the old house, she took a

very different tone with regard to Antoinette, who had grown to perfection since she last saw her. '*Ma belle—mon ange*,' were amongst her mildest expressions; and the child thus treated began to think that, after all, Madame de Cernay was very agreeable. No wonder that everyone thought and said so.

'At least,' said Antoinette afterwards, 'I liked her when she was there, praising me. But when she was gone, I did not much like to think about her.'

Antoinette was all smiles, though she did not talk much in the presence of these grown-up visitors. Madame de Cernay did most of the talking at breakfast, though the Curé made manful efforts to take his share, and argued with her on every subject. She was a fine, pleasant-looking woman, tall and large, with a pretty complexion; altogether she and her ugly little husband were curiously

matched, except in manners, both being very demonstrative and very noisy. They and his other friends often accused Achille de Montmirail of being as quiet as an Englishman.

After breakfast the rain went on pouring in steady sheets. M. le Curé again tucked up his *soutane*, and started off down the avenue with his large umbrella. M. de Montmirail and his friend went to smoke in the library, a dilapidated old room in the west tower. Before M. de Cernay left the salon, he made all sorts of telegraphic signs to his wife, who responded in the same way. Antoinette could hardly help laughing ; the dear Baron looked so very like a monkey.

Pierre came in with a fresh log for the fire, which blazed cheerfully up the wide chimney. Madame de Cernay sat in the large arm-chair where M. de Montmirail

had sat last night, put her feet on a footstool, and held up the *Gaulois* carefully for a screen, as there were no screens in this half-furnished old house.

‘Now, Antoinette, entertain me—amuse me, my sweet child,’ she said. ‘Your poor little Curé prosés terribly ; he thinks himself as wise as Solomon. Don’t sit there, my angel ; you will burn your cheeks,’ as Antoinette sat down in front of the fire.

One could not exactly place one’s self in the large chair opposite to Madame la Baronne. So, after a moment’s thought, Antoinette fetched another, high-backed and very uncomfortable, and placed it a little way off, where she would both show proper politeness and preserve her complexion.

‘Amuse me,’ said Madame de Cernay again ; and her eyes wandered round the room with a considering look.

‘ Shall I tell you about the Convent, madame ?’ said Antoinette. ‘ I made papa laugh yesterday with some of my stories.’

‘ Ah, no, no !’ said Madame de Cernay. ‘ No doubt the Convent is entrancing, and you are all very good there. When I was at the Convent I was very wicked. *I* could tell *you* stories, but I won’t, so don’t ask me. I don’t want to hear about other people, my little angel, but about yourself. You are growing up now, and you must have a great many wishes. Tell me all about them.’

Antoinette folded her arms and looked grave.

Madame de Cernay sincerely thought that it was a very sweet and pretty little face, only a shade too earnest ; perhaps the girl might be inclined to take life too seriously. That was a fault of dear Achille, in spite

of all his sweet temper and easy good-nature.

It appeared that Antoinette had not many wishes. They all resolved themselves into two : that La Tour Blanche might be restored ; and that she might live there with her father.

‘ Ah, *mon Dieu ! Magnifique !* I never heard anything more excellent,’ cried Madame de Cernay, in high approval. ‘ And does your dear father know of these pretty little wishes ? Because I feel sure they must charm him beyond everything.’

‘ Oh yes, madame. He has known for a long time, and we were talking about them again yesterday.’

‘ Charming, charming !’

‘ Oh yes, one can make the most glorious plans ; only one must be reasonable,’ said Antoinette with a little sigh. ‘ Where is

the money to come from ? Papa is not rich enough to restore the château, and he does not think we can live here as it is, though I do. Yesterday he talked about selling it, which would break all our hearts.'

'Of course it would,' said the Baronne, staring at her and nodding. 'No, no ; he will never sell it. He will do something much pleasanter for everybody. Did he talk of any other plan ?'

'He said there might be a way. I did not know what he meant. He said, perhaps he would tell me to-day.'

'Ah ! He thought you were old enough to keep a secret, did he ? *Bien, ma belle !* I think so too.'

'What secret, madame ?' Antoinette opened her large eyes very wide, and the colour rose in her cheeks. Suddenly she knew that something was going to happen,

something that would change one's life—and yet, what could it be? Was it happiness or sorrow? Madame de Cernay was laughing; but she laughed at everything. At that moment something forced into Antoinette's mind the consciousness that her father had been a little mysterious yesterday and this morning—her father, who was generally as open as the day. What could be going to happen? Was he going away anywhere to make his fortune? Had he got some appointment somewhere? Would she be separated from him, perhaps for years? Had he brought her here to say good-bye to the old home, till he could come back again with money enough to restore it?

‘Oh, he is going away!’ she cried in shrill agony, clasping her hands together. ‘Oh no, let him sell it to M. Chocolat! That would be better than going away.’

Madame, you will let me go and tell him so. He is doing it for me, and I would rather die than lose him.'

'Stop ! stay here, my child !' exclaimed Madame de Cernay. 'You are talking like a little madwoman. Who said a word about your father's going away ? He is going nowhere but to Paris, as far as I know ; and he will take you with him.'

Antoinette sat down again, comforted for the moment. But she watched the Baronne with a sort of nervous anxiety, and the happy child-look had vanished from her face. 'I thought he was going away to get some money,' she murmured.

'No, no,' said Madame de Cernay, smiling. 'His friends have thought of a better plan than that ; and I hope his charming little daughter will be too reasonable to set herself against it. It will be as good for her as for

him. She will have a happy, beautiful home, and a friend who will love her, and take her out into the world, and arrange her dress, and in fact give the dear child everything that she wants to make life perfect. She loves her father, and she will see him entirely happy with a companion who will adore him, and with a fortune to do anything he pleases to the old Tour Blanche. It will be one of these days the most beautiful house in the neighbourhood, and no doubt the most agreeable. As Mdlle. de Montmirail grows up——'

Madame de Cernay went on very agreeably with her oration thus far. She leaned back in her chair, gently waving her newspaper screen, and being satisfied that she was breaking the news for M. de Montmirail with the most considerate tenderness, she let her eyes wander round the room as

she talked. But presently they fell on the child's face, and she stopped suddenly.

‘*Mon Dieu*, Antoinette ! What is the matter ?’ she cried. Antoinette was deadly pale : even her lips were white, and she was struggling to speak. At first, she could hardly utter a sound ; then she screamed out, ‘Papa !’ and the shrill agonized cry must have pierced through walls, and doors, for he came hurriedly into the room a moment afterwards, and the child flung herself into his arms in a wild passion of crying. With many caressing words he lifted her up, and absolutely carried her away, leaving Monsieur and Madame de Cernay to express their sentiments to each other.

These sentiments were hardly well defined at once ; but they found a very decided voice later, when the Marquis's two friends

were driving back in their omnibus to Saint-Bernard through the still pouring rain.

‘I certainly would not be her stepmother, the spoilt child!’ cried Madame de Cernay, with shrieks of laughter.

‘She has gained her point ; she will not have a stepmother at all,’ said the Baron. ‘I call his weakness scandalous. Did you understand ? He wishes to put an end at once to all negotiations. Says his chief object was the good of his child, and he will not make her miserable. On my faith, that child has something to answer for. He is too amiable, that dear Achille ; absolutely soft, ridiculous, insane, absurd. To let the fancies of a child overturn family arrangements in that sort of way ! *C’est assomant !* Better marry ten wives than make one’s self a slave to a girl of fourteen. Good

heavens ! that a friend of mine should be such a fool !

M. de Cernay gnashed his teeth, clenched his fist, and thumped on the cushion.

‘ Well, our little plan is spoilt, that is all,’ said his wife, ‘ for my aunt had a better match in view for Béatrice, and only listened to this to please me. Well, we shall see. Madame the mother-in-law may interfere, and bring *la petite* to her senses. I know she wishes for more money in the family. It is a joke, indeed, if a poor man can’t marry again, because his little daughter says no.’





CHAPTER XIV.

THE HÔTEL DES DEUX FRÈRES.

THERE is a corner of Paris which few English know, except those who have lived there long, or by some other means know the best of it. This corner is quiet, and yet actually the height of fashion, being in the same quarter as the hotels of the greatest old families. These families, Catholic, Legitimist, and many of them immensely rich, are and must be at the head of France socially, though of course politically they have no power. And their social power they treat with so much indifference, that

they are being deprived of it in great measure by the Jews, whose influence predominates in Paris now. But a few years ago these people were more consistent; and those great hotels of the Faubourg, with their high white gates and endless rows of shutters, were inhabited by some of the most really noble men and women in Europe. The mad rush after pleasure, the worship of money, were not quite what they are now; aristocrats, with many faults, to be sure, seemed better to deserve their name.

The Rue Sainte-Monique was a short and quiet street, leading from a street chiefly made up of these great houses, with a few dignified shops here and there, to a boulevard opening on some old public gardens with large trees and fountains, certainly the quietest, perhaps in summer the most beauti-

ful of the gardens of Paris. The Jardin Sainte-Monique had once belonged to a large convent, which had given its name to the street and neighbourhood. The Convent itself still existed, very much reduced, hidden behind towering walls at the garden end of the street. It was rich, and at that time not persecuted, and a favourite school for the young girls of the Faubourg. Next door to the Convent, at the end of its long garden wall, was a very pretty house, the Hôtel Sainte-Monique, belonging to the Convent, but lived in for years by the Vicomtesse de Ferrand. This house also had a garden; and one more private house brought the little street to an end. A very large and handsome house, belonging to an old family, with its stables and gardens, had originally filled up the other side of the street. But about forty

years ago, the owner having ruined himself, the house was sold. The Convent tried to buy it, but did not bid high enough, and it fell into the hands of two brothers, who had made their fortune as the chief barbers of the Faubourg. They turned it into an hotel in the modern sense of the word ; and ever since the Hôtel des Deux Frères, as they called it, in the quiet little Rue Sainte-Monique, had kept up its character as the best hotel in Paris for French people. Many people who had no house or apartment of their own in Paris lived there for the season. It was conveniently near their friends, and not far from anything ; it was not dear, and it was supremely comfortable.

The present proprietor was a middle-aged man, son of one of the founders. He kept up the traditions of his family by being a royalist and a good Christian. No atheism

or republicanism was to be met with in the Hôtel des Deux Frères, even among the servants, at least with the knowledge of M. Dupont or his excellent wife.

M. Dupont did not advertise his hotel, and it was by the merest chance that any casual travellers found their way there. He did not want them ; he was well off already, and preferred knowing who his customers were, and answering for their respectability. No snobs, no Jews, no *parvenus*, if possible, at the Hôtel des Deux Frères. He did not care much for foreign nobility, who were very often too ill-conducted for him ; but luckily they found his establishment too quiet to suit their taste. He had a few English customers of old standing, dignified people, yet cosmopolitan, connected with embassies, equally well known in English and French society ; related, perhaps, to

families in the Faubourg. And a few Englishwomen less great in position had by some means found out the good qualities of M. Dupont's hotel, and were always kindly welcomed by him. He, like his father and uncle before him, had a keen eye for the sort of person who would do him credit ; for other people, with all the politeness in the world, the hotel was full to overflowing. Mrs. Percival had been there in her young days with her mother, and her poor sister, Mrs. Darrell ; since then she had gone there rather often, with or without the Canon, whenever it was absolutely necessary to do a little shopping in Paris.

This year, the beginning of December found Mrs. Percival at the Hôtel des Deux Frères, with Paul and Celia. She was deeply engaged with milliners and dressmakers, and to these she gave all

her time and thoughts. Celia, to Paul's happiness, did not think it necessary to show an equal devotion. She was obliged, of course, to give up a certain amount of time, and in that time she took a real and rather impatient interest in the plans and doings of her *couturière*; but stuffs, draperies, trimmings, once out of sight, seemed to be out of mind with her, and so completely that her aunt was sometimes a little bit provoked by her indifference. What was the use of bringing Celia to Paris for shopping, if she pretended to think the shops a bore!—these charming shops, which in this winter season were more brilliantly distracting than ever. There would be plenty of time in the future for walking and driving about with Paul. It was rather too absurd, for instance, that some silly plan for hearing music in a distant church should hinder Celia from

making an appointment with Madame Fripon.

After all, however, Mrs. Percival was not seriously angry. She was too thoroughly well occupied and amused for that. She loved shopping; she could shop from morning till night without any weariness, and with the fullest confidence in her own taste. She was also very much pleased with herself for the generous way in which she was behaving to Celia; and Colonel Ward's secret, which she kept religiously, was an unfailing source of serene satisfaction. Besides, she was truly glad that Paul should be happy, even if Celia did neglect immediate duties for him. It was a new development in Celia, this kind of revolt against things practical. A little inconvenient, certainly, coming at this moment; and perhaps, for the sake of the shopping, it would have been better if

Paul had stayed in England. But after all it did not matter much.

Mrs. Percival was quite artificial enough to agree with the French writer who talks so enthusiastically of Paris in winter. 'Pour le voir beau, heureux, opulent, ce Paris du diable, il faut le regarder vivre sous un ciel bas, alourdi de neige. La nature est pour ainsi dire absente du tableau. Ni vent, ni soleil. Juste assez de lumière pour que les couleurs les plus effacées, les moindres reflets prennent une valeur admirable, depuis les tons gris roux des monuments, jusqu'aux perles de jais qui constellent une toilette de femme.'

This was exactly Paris in the first days of that December, when the marriage arranged between Paul Romaine and Celia Darrell was not much more than a month away. 'Paris du diable!' Nobody could

have suggested that the doings of Mrs. Percival and her young people were diabolic, except so far as all unreality belongs to the devil's kingdom ; and the unreality, in this case, belonged to Celia alone.

She was not happy, but she was in curiously high spirits, carried away by the strange excitement of that dim yet brilliant city, without wind or sun. It was easy to hurry through the days here, without the solemn influences of nature to bring one to one's self, the varying clouds, the sunsets, the moaning pine-woods about Red Towers. Here the days and nights flew by like scenes in a play, and Celia hardly knew how they were flying.

A sort of fatalism seemed to have taken possession of her, in which her only conscious wish was to hurry on the time, to have her marriage over, and everything

made certain. But these feelings did not appear to her friends, who only saw that she was looking brilliant, her eyes deep blue, a ready laugh always on her lips. She had never in her life been so charming to Paul, who felt himself quite repaid now for any little coldness earlier in the autumn. It was almost embarrassing, though the delight of it was beyond words, to find himself suddenly necessary to Celia, so that she would go nowhere and do nothing without him. His silent devotion was almost overwhelmed by the sudden difficulty of finding words. The sunshine in which he now lived, under that low grey sky of Paris, was enough to burn out of his memory all past doubts, all need of trust and patience in the days gone by.

One afternoon, just as twilight was beginning to close in on a dismal day of fog

and rain, Mrs. Percival and her maid drove into the courtyard of the hotel, on their return from a long day's shopping. The hotel was already lighted up, and looked delightfully gay and comfortable; somebody was playing wild valse music in the salon, and the waiter said that monsieur and mademoiselle had come in some time ago. There was a telegram waiting for monsieur in the bureau, he went on to say, and after he got it, he and mademoiselle went into the salon for a few minutes; then mademoiselle went upstairs alone. As far as the waiter knew, madame would find monsieur still in the salon.

Mrs. Percival looked into the salon accordingly, but saw nothing of Paul. The valse seemed to grow madder every moment; it was played by a little man with a pale face and flying hair. A few people were

scattered about the room, talking and listening : one young man was trying to persuade a girl to dance with him ; it was indeed almost impossible to keep still in that whirl of sound. Mrs. Percival had not listened with any extraordinary interest to what the waiter told her. Paul often had telegrams—from his agent, or from the upholsterer who was doing the house. Mrs. Percival climbed slowly upstairs—M. Dupont was old-fashioned and disliked lifts—till she came to Celia's door, where she knocked and went in. At first the lights and shadows in the room flickered so that she hardly saw Celia. A small wood-fire was flaming fitfully on the hearth ; beyond it, close to the window, Celia was sitting in a red velvet arm-chair. A gilt clock was ticking on the mantelpiece ; the floor, in deference to English ideas, was covered with red and yellow carpet,

and on it, the chairs, and the marble-topped furniture, Celia's purchases, clothes, luggage, were thrown about indiscriminately. She sat there with writing things in her lap ; as her aunt came in, she shut her blotting-case, and put down her pen and ink on a chair.

‘ Aunt Flo, what an age you have been !’ she said. ‘ Do leave the door a little open ; that jolly valse makes one want to dance one’s life away.’

But Mrs. Percival shut the door in spite of this.

‘ If you feel like that, you had better go down into the salon,’ she said. ‘ I’m tired, and it distracts my head.’

‘ Sit down, then, and tell me all about everything,’ said Celia.

She did not move from her own chair, but sat with her face turned to the window, looking out into the deepening twilight,

watching the opposite house, whose windows began to be lit up one by one. Mrs. Percival took off her furs, warmed her feet, and gave a vivid account of her day's doings, to which it seemed that Celia was listening intently enough, for she asked a shrewd question or made a quick remark now and then.

‘And what have you been doing all the afternoon, may I ask?’ said Mrs. Percival at last, remembering to be a little injured. ‘It is all very fine, my poking about everywhere with Timms, and ordering all these things, which are your business after all, while you do nothing but play about and amuse yourself.’

‘Now don’t grumble,’ said Celia coolly, ‘because you know you love and adore shopping, and I should only be in your way.’

‘No. Paul might be, but not you. I don’t say much, because of Paul. I am doing all this for his sake, not for yours, because I like to see the poor boy so perfectly happy.’

‘Very well ; very nice of you,’ said Celia ; but her voice was a little discontented. ‘I rather wished I was with you this afternoon,’ she went on. ‘I have been sitting at this window for the last hour, certainly, with nothing to amuse me but Madame de Ferrand and her friends. I wonder if she knows what a watch M. Dupont’s people can keep upon her from this window. I can see all over her garden, as there are no leaves, and into her courtyard, and I can even see her going up her pretty old stairs, and along the gallery, and looking out of the windows. She looks very old, but she walks so nicely, a graceful little old thing. The little girl

who is with her must be her grandchild, I think : about eleven, perhaps—but I don't know, she may be older, only she jumps and dances about like a small child, and wears a large pinafore. And to-day there has been another arrival. Such a handsome man !

‘ What very good eyes you have !’ said Mrs. Percival, laughing.

‘ Oh yes, of course. I saw him drive up, and then there was such a bustle, and the old lady came tripping out on the steps, and the little girl raced across the court and jumped straight into his arms. Then they both tore across to the old madame, and he first kissed her hand, as if she was a little old Queen, and she kissed him on both cheeks, and they all screamed and talked at once, and the child danced a war-dance round them. He was certainly the best-looking

Frenchman I have seen ; fair, and very tall, and a good figure.'

'Very amusing,' said Mrs. Percival. 'And where is Paul all this time?'

'I don't know. You didn't meet him? He talked of going to look for you ; but it seemed rather hopeless, for nobody had a very clear notion where you were gone.'

'To look for me ! How absurd ! I have seen nothing of him, of course. By-the-bye, Jules told me he had had a telegram. I hope it was nothing tiresome.'

'Oh, tiresome, yes—a horrid bother,' said Celia, still looking out of the window. 'At least, he is making it so. I think he is behaving rather stupidly. I am a little bit angry with him, to tell you the truth.'

'Really ! Why ? What was it?'

'He is going off to-night. I don't want him to go. I really can't see the necessity

for making such a dreadful fuss. We shall not be here many days longer, and if he was actually wanted, of course they would have asked him to come. As to his duty, I think his duty is to stay with me, if I want him, and I do. He had better not go. I have told him I won't answer for what may happen. The next thing will be that—that everything will be put off, and then I don't quite know—— However, if Paul cares for me as much as he pretends, he will do what I wish. I have told him, Aunt Flo, and you may tell him the same.'

'Tell him what? What are you talking about? Going to-night! Why, what has happened?' cried Mrs. Percival.

She sat still in her chair, thunderstruck. This conclusion to all Celia's objectless chatter about her opposite neighbours was so strange, so utterly unexpected, that she

could hardly believe her ears. She waited for half a minute, frowning and amazed ; then she started up, crying out, ‘ Explain, Celia ! How can I possibly know what you mean ? ’ and came quickly across to the window, where her niece was sitting motionless.

‘ Well, Aunt Flo, I know you will think me very heartless and very horrid,’ said Celia, and she slowly turned her pretty head, as it lay against the back of her chair, so that she could look Mrs. Percival straight in the face. ‘ The telegram was from some doctor,’ she said. ‘ Paul knows him : I don’t. It was about Colonel Ward. “Colonel Ward is ill. How long will you be away ?” That was the whole of it. Now, why couldn’t Paul telegraph that he would be back in ten days, like a reasonable being ? There was not a word about

danger. Instead of that, almost without listening to me, he telegraphs, "Shall be at Holm to-morrow."'

'I don't see how Paul could possibly do anything else,' said Mrs. Percival. 'You forget, Paul is like a son to him. He wants to see him, no doubt; and it is just like his unselfishness, dear old man, not to ask him to come back at once. I am not sure that we ought not all to go. I must ask Paul what he thinks.'

'Oh no, no!' said Celia, with a sudden flush. 'If we go, we shall never come back, and everything will go wrong, and everything will be put off. What good could we do? If Paul must go, let him go for two or three days, and come back to me here. The Colonel can't be very ill; impossible. Paul confesses that he has always been as strong as a horse. It is

some nonsense of that stupid, officious, meddling doctor.'

'Well, anyhow, Paul is right,' said Mrs. Percival. 'And Celia, some day you will agree with me. Yes, he is right to go for worldly reasons, as well as for others.'

'Paul never thought of anything of that kind,' said Celia. 'It is only his obstinate affection for that tiresome old man; and, after all, he must have made his will ages ago. Really, the future sometimes makes me tremble—that dear Colonel living at our gates, and criticising everything we do.'

Mrs. Percival looked at Celia with a curious expression.

'Don't say any more,' she said. 'You may be sorry some day. I must confess I should be very angry with you now, if I was not rather glad to find that you are in love with Paul.'

Celia stared. Her aunt said no more, but went away and left her.

‘ In love with Paul !’ the girl repeated to herself ; and then she began to laugh.

She took a letter out of her pocket and looked at it—a worn letter, crumpled and frayed at the edges.

‘ What a bore it is !’ she said. ‘ I suppose I am rather unhappy. Certainly I am a donkey. For even if I could change things now, I don’t believe I would. But I’m not in love with Paul, dear Aunt Flo ; only it is too stupid of him to go away now, because I don’t mind his being in love with me. Perhaps I don’t care much for anything or anybody—except having everything I want, and—this horrid letter. What’s the use of keeping it, by-the-bye ? It’s dangerous—and I know it well enough to answer it, if I haven’t done that already.

Oh, Vincent, I wish you had let me alone !'

Then she took a written sheet of paper from her blotting-case, and read it through with smiling mouth and eyes.

'Too silly to send, I'm afraid. But I'll keep it a day or two. Is that the bell at Sainte-Monique ? I wonder if the nuns would sing me into a good temper. I hate this—and I must make up with that silly boy, and let him go to his boring old Colonel in peace.'

She got up and pulled the window open. It had stopped raining, and was not yet dark. In the opposite house she could see the little dark figure of Madame de Ferrand, stepping along through her glazed gallery, followed by her maid with a large cloak. No doubt she was going to Benediction at Sainte-Monique. The Convent

church was a favourite resort of all the ladies, great and small, in the neighbourhood; and the fame of the nuns' singing was spread all through Christian Paris.

'Yes; I'll go too,' Celia decided. 'I wonder if I could anyhow make acquaintance with those people. They would distract me a little while Paul is away.'

She put on her prettiest hat, and wrapped herself in furs. Before starting, full of a new idea of being good, she stooped over the fire and dropped Vincent's letter into it, between two little red logs. It flamed up instantly.

'I wish I needn't give you any answer but that, my friend,' she murmured, and then she hurried away downstairs. On the way she met her aunt's maid, looking tired and sulky.

'Oh, Timms,' she said, 'you may as well

tell my aunt that I have gone to church. Just across the street—Sainte-Monique, the Convent church, you know.'

'Not alone, miss, at this time of day !'
Timms remonstrated.

'Yes, alone. Tell Mr. Romaine he may come and fetch me, if he likes.'

As Celia's luck would have it, just as she came out of the hotel, a small door opened in Madame de Ferrand's *porte cochère* opposite, and she herself stepped into the street, followed by the tall man and the little girl. Celia crossed the street, and followed them closely along the pavement to the tall iron gates of the Convent, which were standing a little open. A porter was in charge, and a carriage had just set down some ladies, who were walking up the flagged path, under the shelter of high walls and leafless trees, to the lighted church door.

The bell was still ringing, and music and sweet odours came pouring out into the dreary evening.

The gentleman who had walked those few yards with Madame de Ferrand stopped at the gates, and lingered there a moment, lifting his hat as the old lady and the child passed on. The light of the lamps at the gate fell full upon his handsome face, and on Celia's too, as she went by, following the others.

Of course he looked at her, holding his hat a moment longer while she passed him ; and Celia was quite aware that his glance was one of startled admiration ; she was used to much broader stares, by this time, from Parisians of every degree. But she hurried on to the church door, and he walked leisurely back to the Hôtel Sainte-Monique.

At the door, having quickened her steps a little, she overtook the old Vicomtesse and the young girl, who raised a lovely little dark face as the Englishwoman came up to her. Celia could not help smiling, as she met those speaking eyes, and her smile added enchantment to her beauty, more brilliant than usual after the excitement she had gone through. The French child, with one quick glance at her grandmother's still graceful back, dipped her finger in the holy water and held it out to Celia, who touched it and then crossed herself, knowing the pretty friendly custom. Then they smiled at each other again; and then the nuns in their grated chapel broke into strange magic singing, with a sweetness intensely sad :

‘Lingering and wandering on, as loth to die.’

Thus in truth it was that Celia approached

her first acquaintance with the old Vicomtesse de Ferrand, her granddaughter Antoinette, and her son-in-law the Marquis de Montmirail.





CHAPTER XV.

AN OLD FRIEND AND A NEW SLAVE.

PAUL'S troubled face, when Mrs. Percival saw him, showed plainly enough how he felt his first real difference with Celia.

‘I’ve had a telegram,’ he began quickly.
‘You know? You have seen Celia?’

‘I have just come from her. I am so sorry, Paul. May I see the telegram?’

He put it into her hand, and began walking restlessly up and down the room, looking on the floor.

‘Dr. Graves; I have heard his name:

who is he?' said Mrs. Percival after a minute.

'Don't you remember? The doctor at Wilford, who attended my father till we had the London man.'

'Not an alarmist?'

'Oh no; a sensible old chap. Well, I don't call that telegram alarmist, do you? He puts it as mildly as he can. Perhaps you don't see what should make one anxious? I've never known the Colonel ill before; that's true: but to my mind that makes it worse. People like him break down suddenly, don't they? Then, why should Graves have telegraphed instead of writing? The Colonel must have let out that he wanted to see me. In fact, I think I ought to go.'

As he said this, he looked up at her almost wistfully. Evidently it was a terrible business altogether; he was torn between

love and loyalty to his old friend and the passion for Celia which made it hard to resist her least wish, harder still to go away and leave her. Perhaps he was already half regretting that he had telegraphed back in such a hurry. But he told Mrs. Percival nothing of all this, only looking at her with anxious, tired, puzzled eyes ; would she take the same view as Celia ?

‘ Of course you must go,’ said Mrs. Percival quietly. ‘ I have no doubt he wants to see you ; why, he has nobody but you in the world. I wish I could go too ; but that would be foolish. I don’t really feel anxious, you know, Paul. He has always been so strong, such a wiry sort of man ; I feel sure he will rally from this, whatever it is. But I have no doubt he is nervous about himself. Yes, you must go, and come back as soon as you can, to take us home. Celia will miss

you dreadfully ; but I shall not. I shall be much too busy. And there's one advantage in your going away ; Celia will be able to think a little about her shopping.'

She ended with her kindest and sweetest smile.

'Thanks ; you are very comforting,' said Paul, but he sighed.

'Now tell me about your plans,' said Mrs. Percival. 'I suppose you are going by the mail to-night. Have you told Jules ? Have you ordered your dinner ? I had better ring at once.'

'Oh, lots of time for that,' said Paul.

Then he took another turn along the room, and came back, and stood still before her.

'Have you talked it over with Celia at all ?' he asked.

'Not much,' said Mrs. Percival. 'I

came away to find you, almost directly she told me.'

He looked on the floor silently. Mrs. Percival felt angry with Celia, for she understood his thoughts well ; but now she did not think it advisable to repeat the encouraging remarks she had made at Holm.

These lovers must arrange their own affairs now ; she thought she could trust Celia for coming to her senses. She would certainly have smiled if she could have known what cruel words they were that went on ringing in Paul's ears. ' You talk so much about loving me. That's all very fine. If you really loved me, you wouldn't go away and leave me on such an excuse as this.' Paul was very young, and quite inexperienced ; these words of Celia's tormented him terribly. How was he to prove his love ? How was he to show her that

she was mistaken? It was a dreadful difficulty. But he did not confide it to Mrs. Percival.

Presently Timms came in, and brought Celia's message, at which Paul's face brightened a little ; though both he and Mrs. Percival were startled at her having escaped alone to the Convent. It was too late to overtake her now ; but some time before the service could be supposed to have ended, Paul ran down the stairs on his way to the church, stopping at the bureau to give some order about his departure.

There were often people talking to Monsieur or Madame Dupont in the bureau ; at this moment a tall man stood there under the gaslights, deeply engaged in turning over the visitors' book in search of acquaintances.

‘Percival,’ he said in a low tone to himself. ‘Romaine—*mais*, Romaine!—Madame,

who is he, this Monsieur Romaine you have got staying in the hotel? Is he English—a fine young fellow with dark eyes?’

‘*Ma foi, monsieur,*’ cried Madame Dupont, as she sat, fat and smiling, knitting in her corner; ‘you have only to turn your head and see for yourself.’

So Achille de Montmirail turned round and found himself face to face with his old acquaintance, Paul Romaine. He seized both his hands and wrung them with unfeigned delight.

‘Going away to-night! Impossible; nothing of the kind! My dear friend, I shall treat you as you would treat me if you caught me in England. You shall come and stay with me. I am living in that house opposite with my mother-in-law, the Vicomtesse de Ferrand. She will be charmed to see you. You really must go?’

Well, at least, let me introduce you to her and my daughter. You will dine with us? We will dine at six, if you please, and let you go in time for your train. But how much better if you would put off going till to-morrow morning. The old friend is not so very ill? It is nothing immediate? Well, surely, if you are in London to-morrow evening——’

‘Thanks, you are most awfully good. I wish I could dine with you, but I can’t even do that,’ said Paul.

It was impossible not to respond to M. de Montmirail’s friendly warmth; but surely some evil genius had brought him on the scene just then. If people do not appear till too late, they had better not appear at all. On this evening, of all evenings, M. de Montmirail was most horribly in the way. He might perhaps hinder the farewell

talk with Celia—the last attempt at an understanding. She had given Paul the opportunity by telling him to meet her at the church door ; and as it was not raining, Paul had already planned that he would ask her to take a turn with him in the gardens beyond. But with this friendly and hospitable Frenchman on his hands, what was he to do ? He was very glad to see him again ; but he wished him in Siberia.

He murmured something about having an appointment, as the Marquis took his arm and walked with him across the courtyard.

‘ Certainly. I will not delay you. But which way are you going ? I may as well walk a few yards with you.’

‘ Well, I am only going a few yards,’ said Paul in despair. ‘ I am going to meet a lady at the church gate across there.’

‘*Mais parfaitement !*’ cried Achille. ‘It is the very thing that I should do if I was a good boy. My mother-in-law and my daughter are there at this moment. I took them there, and turned back from the gate. Not from unbelief, as you know—you remember our talk about these things—but because Sainte-Monique is supposed to belong to the ladies. Shall we walk there together, then ? And now tell me, has anything happened to you since we met in England ? Nothing very important ? Nor to me. And the old house in Surrey is just the same, is it ? Some day, when I am in England again, I mean to pay you a visit there.’

‘I hope you will,’ said Paul. ‘I shall be very glad to see you. Just at present my house is by way of being done up and made very smart, because I am going to be married.’

‘I am rejoiced to hear that, my dear friend,’ said Achille cordially. ‘I shall have the pleasure, then, of paying my homage to the charming Madame Romaine. Charming I know she must be, for you are a man of good taste. She is beautiful, too, no doubt? One of the belles of the Woolsborough country?’

Paul told him who she was, and also that in a few minutes he hoped to introduce him to her. He was beginning to feel a little more cheerful. In M. de Montmirail’s atmosphere of sunny kindness everything took a brighter hue; and while Paul talked to him of Celia, remembering what a real right she had to be called charming, remembering, too, the happy experiences of the last few days, he began to think that this shadow must certainly soon pass away. After all, why was Celia angry at his going

to England ? Because she did not want him to leave her ! Was that a state of things to be complained of by Celia's lover ?

The service was not yet over, and Paul walked up and down the Rue Sainte-Monique several times with his friend, telling him all his plans and doings, to which the Frenchman listened with sympathetic ears. Naturally, perhaps, Paul was rather wrapped up in himself ; he was also totally without curiosity, which has its good side, like other vices, and sometimes makes an important element in friendship ; so that it hardly occurred to him to ask M. de Montmirail anything of his own doings, or of his old house down in the west. Achille, in his good-nature, was not at all surprised at this one-sided state of things, perceiving that the nice English boy was so deeply in love that he could think of nothing else.

‘ *C’est amusant !* ’ he thought to himself.
‘ What a happy fellow ! ’

‘ I am beginning to think,’ he said presently, ‘ that I have already seen Mademoiselle Darrell. A young lady came from the Deux Frères and followed us as far as the church ; she went in at the same time as my mother-in-law and Antoinette. She was quite a distinguished young lady, and as she passed me, I thought she was amazingly beautiful. I thought, too, that she was English. I have seen the type there, though never such a face as hers. And if you will forgive me, no French demoiselle of such an appearance would be allowed to make three steps in Paris alone. Even with your English ideas, my friend, you will see that it is hardly to be advised. Madame her aunt, or at least her *bonne*——’

‘ I ought to have been with her,’ said

Paul quickly ; ‘but I did not know she was gone.’

‘You ! Oh well, yes, being English. One forgets your ideas a little,’ said the Marquis, smiling. ‘You think I was right, then ? The English beauty that I saw was Mademoiselle Darrell ?’

‘I think there is no doubt about it,’ said Paul.

‘Then let me say that you are a very fortunate man.’

Achille de Montmirail looked at the young fellow by his side with astonishment, mixed with respect ; there might have been a little envy too, if his character had been less amiable.

‘Is the beauty in love with him, I wonder ?’ was the thought that flashed into his mind.

Celia’s looks had struck him even more

than he chose to say. He honestly liked Paul very much, and thought him superior to most of the young Englishmen he had met; but somehow he did not seem the right man to marry a woman with a face like that.

‘She will lead you a life, my friend,’ he thought. ‘There is something of the devil in that woman, or I am very much mistaken. You are a poet, a dreamer, an enthusiast, with the best heart in the world, and she will take your heart in her hands and break it for you. No, you are not the man for her, and I doubt seriously if she does more than tolerate you, even now. Her uncle and aunt have made the marriage; you are rich, and she is probably poor. I see it all. Well, your married life will not be a tame business, as mine would have been, if *la petite* had not interfered. And you may be

happy for six months, or perhaps a little longer. After all, who knows? The game may be worth the candle !'

So thought the Marquis while Paul talked to him, and while they passed up and down the pavement outside the lighted Convent gates.

Presently these were opened, carriages drove up, the small congregation of ladies came out of the church door and down the narrow stony passage. Celia came among the first, and Paul stepped forward to meet her; at the sight of her, his misgivings suddenly returned. He did not know whether she was still angry with him; but she met him with a smile.

'So you came,' she said in a low voice. 'Have you been waiting long? I thought the service was going on till midnight; but the singing was divine. I wished you were there.'

‘Didn’t you know I should come?’ said Paul.

‘How could I tell,’ she said, still smiling, ‘when I had been so disagreeable! Come, what are we waiting for?’

While these few words were passing between them, M. de Montmirail had turned aside for a moment to speak to some lady he knew. But she was gone now, and he came up to Paul and Celia. Madame de Ferrand and Antoinette had not yet appeared. Celia looked at him with astonishment.

‘M. de Montmirail would like to be introduced to you,’ said Paul. ‘You know how I hoped I might meet him again.’

‘Oh yes, I am so glad,’ said Celia. She held out her hand to the Marquis, who made her a very low bow, and just touched the tips of her fingers with his own.

‘Mademoiselle, it is the greatest honour

and pleasure. My mother-in-law, the Vicomtesse de Ferrand, and my little daughter. *Ma mère*, you remember hearing of my English friend, M. Romaine. Let me present him to you. I met him accidentally half an hour ago at the Deux Frères. He has told me his history, and has given me the happiness of being acquainted with Mademoiselle Darrell.'

It was not often, in Madame de Ferrand's agreeable and benevolent life, that she found herself hopelessly puzzled. Achille's English friends and connections did not interest her particularly, and among them she could not recall the name of Romaine.

But under the lamp at the gate she saw two young English people, looking, as far as she could see, perfectly *comme il faut*, and quite at home in the situation. Achille seemed to be in raptures, and she always

made it a rule to be civil to his acquaintances. It was nothing new for him to discover hidden treasures at the Hôtel des Deux Frères. So she made a low curtsy and several polite speeches, her sweet little pale face looking very amiable, and trotted off down the street with Celia by her side, while Antoinette took her father's arm as he and Paul followed.

Antoinette's bright eyes and quick ears were everywhere. She was charmed to see the little Englishman at last, though certainly it was true he was by no means little. But she could not pay him quite so much attention as if he had appeared alone, for the prospect of really making acquaintance with Celia was almost too entrancing to be real. Wonderful castles were suddenly built in Antoinette's head, as she followed that graceful figure down the street. It did

not at all occur to her young French mind that Celia was Paul Romaine's *fiancée*—his sister, she thought, not having realized the difference of names.

They parted, with many politenesses, at the gate of the Hôtel Sainte-Monique. The ladies went in, and M. de Montmirail crossed the road with Paul and Celia.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said, ‘why do you let him run away to England to-night? It is too mortifying for me, only to meet him and lose him.’

‘I don’t want him to go,’ said Celia, in her sweetest voice and manner. ‘But he thinks it is his duty, and I suppose people must do what they think is their duty, monsieur. He has a dear old friend who is ill, you see.’

What an angel she was, after all !

When M. de Montmirail was gone, with

many *au revoirs* to Paul, and compliments to Celia, they stood still for a minute in the lighted courtyard, looking after his vanishing figure.

‘Well, you have one nice friend, at all events,’ said Celia, turning to Paul with a radiant smile.

‘Do you like him? I’m glad,’ said Paul. ‘I thought you didn’t care for Frenchmen.’

‘I don’t generally. But this one is so thoroughly nice, and so very good-looking. His manners are rather demonstrative, certainly—but they are only pretty, not ridiculous.’

‘You made a tremendous impression on him,’ said Paul, smiling, and gazing at her with a sort of wonder; she seemed to have forgotten her vexation with him, as if it had never been.

‘Did I? That is delightful. And on the

old Vicomtesse, too, I flatter myself. She asked me so prettily to come and see her, and to bring my aunt. But the child—did you notice the child, Paul ?

‘ I saw her, of course. I forget what she was like.’

‘ How stupid of you ! You certainly are one of the blindest people. I thought you liked looking at pretty things.’

‘ I was thinking of beautiful things, and sad things. I had no room for pretty things.’

Celia paused for a moment.

‘ Look here,’ she said, ‘ this courtyard is not the place to talk nonsense in. We must go in—or if you like, if you have time, shall we have a little walk first ?’

‘ Just what I was hoping for,’ said Paul. ‘ If that family had not seized upon us, I meant to ask you to come with me into the gardens.’

‘ Let us go there now,’ said Celia.

As they walked up the street she went on talking about Antoinette de Montmirail, and telling Paul how pretty she was, what a charming little creature.

‘ I am sure she is older than she looks,’ she said. ‘ Her mother must have been very dark and very pretty. She is dead, isn’t she ?’

‘ Yes, long ago. The girl is fourteen ; he told me so.’

‘ I wonder he has not married again.’

‘ I believe he thinks himself rather too poor. They think so much of money in France, you know.’

‘ Well, they are quite right ; life is an awful thing without it. But I wonder some heiress has not married him—some pretty little snob with an immense fortune. There

must be hundreds of them who would be only too delighted.'

'He would not be delighted,' said Paul. 'I fancy he thinks a good deal of his family. He won't sell himself.'

'He seems to be a sort of hero all round.'

'I rather think he is—I don't know.'

The Jardin Sainte-Monique was solitary at that season, and that time of day. The trees stretched their bare arms rather low over the broad gravel walks, which were very damp, and would have been very dark too, but for the lamps, of which there were a good number. The seats under the trees would have been delightful on a summer evening; they now shone in the lamp-light with dreary, wet reflections, and nobody but distracted lovers would have dreamed of sitting down on them. Celia, certainly, was

not likely to run such a risk. To be in the garden at all was a wild enough flight for her. She had no idea of staying there long, though she wanted to send Paul away happy. She went on chattering a little more about her new acquaintances, as she walked with him along the wet crunching gravel. His answers became shorter and more absent every minute. At last they both dropped into silence. A very little of this was enough for her, in her state of strung excitement and impatience. She was rather angry that Paul did not seem able to follow her lead, and take things up where they had been before, without a tiresome explanation. But she supposed that the silly fellow must be humoured.

‘Well,’ she said in her softest voice, ‘what is the matter now?’

‘Have you forgiven me?’ said Paul.

‘Don’t you think you are a little bit stupid? Why should we talk about forgiving? If I was cross, I’m sorry—and you may give my love to the Colonel, and tell him to get better directly, or I will never speak to him again—and don’t be tragical, for heaven’s sake.’

The words were heartless enough; but there are ways of saying things which alter their meaning very effectually, and the way in which Celia said all this was perfectly sweet to Paul.

‘Yes, I am stupid,’ he said, ‘a great deal too stupid for you; because you said something this afternoon which has been making me perfectly wretched ever since. Don’t you know what it was?’

‘No, indeed,’ she said. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea. Tell me.’

‘You said—that if I loved you, I shouldn’t

go away and leave you on such an excuse as this.'

There was a moment's pause ; then Celia gave a little laugh.

' My dear Paul,' she said, ' I say a thousand things in the day that I don't mean, and certainly that was one of them. You will have to study the subject, and find out which they are, because I can't always explain. Of course I am not glad you are going. I am very sorry ; I think it is great nonsense, though it may be right. I hope the Colonel will agree with me, and send you back at once. I want you a great deal more than he does. No, make yourself happy ; I didn't mean that nasty thing ; how could I ? You care for me too much, not too little. Some day you will find out that I am not good enough for you. Now let us go back ; it's horribly cold, and we

have had enough of this. No more explanations, please. I'm not in the right state of mind for them. In Paris one lives and enjoys ; one doesn't think and explain.'

'Do you love me?' Paul said. Somehow he could not bear that quarter of an hour to come to an end.

'Why do you make me say things over and over again?' she said. 'I will answer no more of your questions till you come back ; then I shall have a great many things to tell you. Now say good-bye, and be happy.'

'May I really be happy?'

'You are a very unreasonable creature to be anything else,' said Celia ; and as Paul kissed her, there under the dark trees, he knew that she was right, and that no mortal man could be happier.

But all that night, through the roaring of

the train, as it rushed away from Paris to the cold north and the dividing sea, one of his own songs went on sounding in his head—Tosti's music and Whyte-Melville's words :

‘ Good-bye, summer ! good-bye—good-bye ! ’





CHAPTER XVI.

DI AND HER MASTER.

‘THAT was why I telegraphed to you,’ said Dr. Graves. ‘He recovered his speech, as I say, in the course of a few hours, and to a certain extent the use of his left side, though you see he is still very helpless. Before he could speak he managed to scribble on a piece of paper, “Don’t send for Mr. Romaine ;” but I found in spite of this that he was very uneasy in his mind, calculating how soon you would be at home. And then he said to me yesterday morning, “I don’t want to spoil his pleasure, but I

wish he was here. There's my will. I want him to be here when I make my will, and I don't think I ought to put it off. What do you say, Dr. Graves?" Well, no one could think of deceiving a man like him. I told him, the sooner he made his will the better, for I could not deny that he was in a precarious state. He said no more ; but I took it on myself to send you that telegram, and I hope you think I did right. I did not think I need do more than hint that he was anxious for your return.'

'You were quite right, Dr. Graves,' said Paul.

'And allow me to say,' said the doctor, 'if he asks you to write to his lawyer this afternoon, I advise you to make no objection.'

'It is a very strange thing, isn't it?' said

Paul. 'A strong man like him, no great age, and leading such a simple life, to break down in this sort of way.'

'Sometimes these things are unaccountable,' said Dr. Graves ; and then, as the cold wind came whistling over the common, he hastily buttoned up his coat, got into his carriage and drove away.

Before Paul turned back to the house, he lingered a minute or two at the gate, looking up the road, across to where dark masses of trees, some changeless firs, the others all bare and brown, separated him from Red Towers. There he supposed that the works, the preparations for Celia, were going on actively. He had half forgotten them ; but it had occurred to Celia's active mind, just before he started from the Paris hotel, that his going back now might be something more useful than a

sacrifice to friendship, after all ; he might see that the workmen were not making mistakes, and that Colonel Ward's illness did not bring things to a standstill. She chattered away, reminding Paul of a good many things, while he was hurrying through his dinner. Her manner was very charming, and she talked of Red Towers as if it was home. Paul promised faithfully to bring her back a full report of everything. But now, within a few yards of his transformed old house, standing at Colonel Ward's gate in the cold twilight of that December day, with such a damp chill in the air, a slight powdering of snow on road, trees, wastes of dead bracken, solemn woods that stood unmoving, under a low grey sky that seemed to promise more, Paul felt that all the painting and polishing and ornamenting of Red Towers was some-

how quite incongruous ; it pleased him less than ever. His mood on that sad winter day was far more in accordance with the dark, shabby old cottage behind him, where preparations were going on for something so very different from the life that lay before him. Perhaps this dismal state of mind was not unnatural. Paul was never very high - spirited ; melancholy, to characters of his kind, comes more easily than its opposite. Lately, in Paris, Celia had given him such wild excitement of happiness as he had never known before ; then came the reaction, a certain consequence with a nature like his, and now it seemed a little difficult to believe in happiness at all. People like Paul are never very consistent ; if their day is unclouded, their night is starless. Nature has loved them, and made them sensitive to all her influences ; but

it is only to her very highest favourites that she has given the great gift of her reasonableness too.

As Paul stood leaning on the gate, sad enough, something came and pushed a cold nose against his legs. It was Di, who had hardly left her master's room since he was taken ill. Paul stooped and patted her curly sides.

‘Yes, old doggie,’ he said, ‘I remember how you came and made love to her in the stable-yard that day. Well, no wonder! everybody and everything loves her; how can they help it, I should like to know! and England is a coldish country without her, you’ll allow that, Di; and yet she would tell me I am very unreasonable not to be happy. That’s because she can’t quite understand how every look and every word of hers matters so tremendously.

What is it like, life without her? Don't you know, Di? Then I'll tell you. It's like crawling along a frozen lane between high banks, with one's eyes on the ground. That's it. There's no outlook, nothing. One's faculties are frozen, you see. One can't even care whether the drawing-room is the right shade of blue; that is, whether she is to be happy or miserable. One is in fact like a toad in a stone. Come along, let us go back to the Colonel.'

Di's eloquent hazel eyes gazed earnestly at Paul while he talked to her in this fashion. She was doubtful; she did not altogether understand him, till he came to his last proposition, and to this she agreed most cordially. She trotted back before him, in at the door—which he had left half open when he went out with the doctor—and up the low, uncarpeted stair-

case, and along the uneven boards of the passage to her master's door. Barty opened it before she had time to scratch. She went to the bed and stood up on her hind legs for a good look at the sick man, who lay and looked at her without speaking. Then, with a faint little cry, too low to disturb him, she went off to the fire and laid herself down. Barty went lightly out of the room, and Paul came in and shut the door.

The arrangements of Colonel Ward's room were like himself, and like an old soldier, simple and severe. His little iron bed had no curtains, and there was no carpet on the floor. Since he began to be ill, Barty, his chief nurse, had hung warm curtains at the window, brought an arm - chair upstairs, and imported a tall old screen from Red Towers ; but the Colonel presently com-

plained that this darkened the room, so it was pushed away into a corner.

On the whole, the room was cheerful, with a fine fire, which Barty had just made up, crackling in the grate. And Colonel Ward was by no means a dismal invalid. As Paul came in and sat down, stretching out his long legs to the fire, he watched him with a sort of sharp satisfaction. But presently his expression changed a little.

‘Well, Paul, old boy, what have you been doing?’ he said. ‘Burning the candle at both ends again, as you did when you were reading for honours? What’s the meaning of it now? You are not in trouble?’

Paul looked rather wonderingly at the grey face on the pillow. The Colonel’s wits were plainly as quick as ever, though his voice was low and failed wearily now and then.

‘No trouble except your illness. That’s one, certainly,’ he said, and he smiled.

‘My illness hasn’t had time to pull you down like that,’ said the Colonel. ‘It must be that hateful Paris, which takes the colour and the goodness out of everybody.’

‘I didn’t know,’ said Paul.

‘Has it had any effect on Miss Darrell?’

‘None—except that she gets more perfect every day.’

‘More perfect—a first-class man—he is demoralized, he has forgotten his English,’ said the Colonel. ‘Did she send me any message?’

‘Oh yes, her love; and so did Mrs. Percival, a great many messages, and you are to make haste and get well, Colonel.’

‘Ah! what did Graves say about that?’

‘He said—well, that you would have to be very careful.’

Paul stared at the fire, and Colonel Ward did not speak again for a few minutes.

Presently he said, in a stronger voice than before :

‘ Graves thinks I am going to die.’

‘ He didn’t tell me so,’ said Paul. ‘ Look here, Colonel ; you have no business to say such a thing, or to take it into your head. Why, you are getting better.’

‘ Getting better ! well, perhaps so,’ muttered the Colonel. ‘ Three days ago I couldn’t speak. But it’s coming again, you know. I asked Graves, and he couldn’t deny it.’

‘ That is all nonsense,’ said Paul. ‘ Doctors know nothing. Look at Di ; she agrees with me ;’ and Di, as she lay before the fire, lifted her head and gave that sad little human cry of hers again.

‘ Does she ? I don’t think that sounds

very cheerful,' said her master. 'Be reasonable, my lad, and let us face facts. Why should I live to be a so much older man than your father, whose life was so much more valuable than mine? Don't think I am fretting over what can't be helped. Life has not had any very deep interest for me since your father died. One wants a friend of one's own age.'

'No deep interest? Why, Colonel, what sort of interest have you taken in me, and my concerns?'

'That's a different thing; that's one-sided,' said the Colonel, a smile flickering over his worn face. 'I am not complaining, mind you. I don't complain, either way. Your friend the Vicar came to see me yesterday—he's an odd chap, that—and asked me among other things if I was afraid of death. I said, 'Well, a soldier who has tried to do

his duty is not afraid of his superiors.' He didn't seem quite satisfied, but Graves came in just then, so he said no more. Your father and I always agreed that we should choose death in battle. Neither of us was to have his choice, it seems ; but I don't see why death in a room like this should be met in a different way. It is the same thing, after all ; only you have more time to think about it. And it's no kindness for one's friends to disagree with the doctor. I don't suppose Graves is a specially clever man ; but he knows his trade well enough for me, and when I ask him a question, he tells me the truth.'

'I cannot see why he should take a dark view, or you either,' said Paul. 'You are getting better, and you may live for years.'

'Well, I may,' said Colonel Ward. 'Who knows ? I may. I should like at any rate

to live till after you are married, and not to give you too much trouble in the meanwhile. Now we have talked enough for the present. By-and-by we must have a few words on business.'

He closed his eyes, and seemed to sleep. For nearly an hour Paul sat and dreamed over the red gleaming fire ; the warm stillness of the room was not so oppressive to him as it would have been to most young men, for he was hardly conscious of it. Part of the time he was himself almost asleep, not having closed his eyes the night before. The world outside grew darker ; it was just twenty-four hours since he had walked with M. de Montmirail to meet Celia at the door of Sainte-Monique. Only twenty-four hours ; they seemed like days to Paul, accustomed as he was now to be with Celia every day, and all day long. Di

pricked her ears now and then at some sound below ; she never slept, but kept her faithful watch lying there. Generally her clear eyes were fixed on her master's bed ; but sometimes she lay looking very earnestly at Paul, as if his dark pale face and tired eyes had some fascination for her. When his eyelids drooped, and his head fell back against the chair, she sat suddenly bolt upright, staring at him ; this change of position had the instant effect of rousing him, and then Di was satisfied, and lay down again. It was evident that in her opinion a watcher in the Colonel's room must not be allowed to close his eyes ; at the same time, she took quiet means of keeping him awake. Unless the Colonel was talking, no bark, or even moan, was to be heard from Di.

Presently Barty came softly upstairs, and

called the Squire out of the room. His agent, Mr. Bailey, was down at Red Towers that day, and wished to see him, having just heard of his arrival. Paul went down, leaving Barty in charge, and found Mr. Bailey in the drawing-room.

The agent was a lively young London man, without any of the old-world air which seemed to belong to most of the connections and dependents of Red Towers, as well as to the place itself. His office, however, was hereditary, and his father had been a very different and more reverential sort of person. He was much smarter than Paul, whom he considered one of the queerest fish he had ever known. But though he talked of Paul in his absence in an amazingly patronizing strain, he knew quite well how to behave to him in his presence; and Paul rather liked him, though they never found

much to say to each other. He was honest, intelligent, and very energetic, and had done a great deal for the estate in the last few years. The present alterations interested him deeply, and he was an enthusiastic admirer of the future Mrs. Romaine, whose artistic taste seemed to him to equal her beauty and her 'fascinating manners.'

He had a great deal to say that evening about the house, and the way in which the works were going on. On the whole, he thought things were satisfactory. He spoke of Colonel Ward's illness with civil concern, and did not tell Paul that the foreman of the works had thought himself more hindered than helped by the Colonel's constant and active supervision. He did, however, hint that the Colonel had fussed himself into his illness, having been terribly put out about some wrong paper which had come from

London, and with which a room had been half papered before the mistake was found out. Mr. Bailey said he had never seen the Colonel so painfully excited about anything. He confessed that the news of the stroke, a few days after, had not surprised him very much.

Paul listened sadly ; he had heard nothing of this before, for the Colonel had put the matter right without troubling him about it ; and now it seemed as if this worry might indeed have brought on his illness. He did not say much to Mr. Bailey, but when the agent suggested, ‘ Was it too dark for him to come and look at the house now ? ’ he answered rather quickly, ‘ Yes.’ The whole subject of the house and its decorations seemed painful and incongruous now.

‘ I shall be down again the day after to-morrow,’ said Mr. Bailey. ‘ Will that suit

you to look over things ? Shall you be here still ?'

' Yes, I shall be here. Very well—unless the Colonel is worse,' Paul said absently. And the young agent went away, thinking, perhaps, how oddly the goods of this world are distributed. He did not, of course, philosophize, but he said to himself: ' Now, there's a fellow who has got everything, and cares for nothing ;' and he went on to think what he would do with Paul Romaine's possessions if they were his.

When he was gone, finding that the Colonel was still asleep, this young man who cared for nothing sat down and wrote to Celia, telling her all that was in his heart.

He did go to Red Towers that evening, after all. It was easy to fall back into the old habit of doing what the old servants arranged for him ; and when Sabin came

across to say that his room was ready, and that he could dine comfortably in the study, which the workmen had not touched, Paul soon saw that Barty and Mrs. Perks had enough to do at the Cottage, without making preparations for him. The idea was so reasonable, that he readily acted upon it. He went up again to see the Colonel, who was lying very still ; their talk in the afternoon, when he had been so bright and full of life, seemed to have exhausted him. As Paul stood by his side for a minute, the Colonel opened his eyes and murmured something. Paul had to stoop down to hear what it was.

‘Di must belong to Celia,’ he said. ‘Do you hear ? Don’t forget.’

‘I will tell her you said so,’ Paul answered, with a sudden burning sensation about his eyes, and a tightening at his throat.

His letter to Celia had already gone to the post ; the message must wait for another day ; but he hardly knew whether his dear old friend's words gave him more pleasure or pain. That the Colonel should have such faith in Celia, faith enough to trust her with Di, was indeed beyond what he had ever hoped ; but he knew now that the Colonel would not get better.

There was no business talk that night ; so he told Barty to fetch him if he was wanted, and walked off, tired and sad enough, towards Red Towers. Sabin tried to cheer him with hopeful remarks while he dined in the old study, but he was not in a mood for talking to Sabin. He was thinking all the time of that evening, not so many weeks ago, when the Colonel dined with him there, and afterwards, in the garden, he told him of his engagement. How angry he was,

dear old fellow ! But then how easily, when she came, Celia had smoothed his prejudices away.

The old house was always very silent at night, but that night its stillness was something quite oppressive, and Paul, thinking of Celia's love of human life and stir, of the unflagging enthusiasm with which she had lately been enjoying Paris, of the absence in her nature—which he thought he knew so well—of any desire for peace and quietness, began to wonder how she would endure living here. Then he reminded himself, as he sat staring into the study fire, with his happy little terrier at his feet, that Celia would have the power to make Red Towers as cheerful as she pleased ; the whole county would be delighted to welcome her ; she would soon have plenty of acquaintances, many of whom, at present, he only knew by

name, being known to them as a clever, shy, eccentric boy, whose two guardians had effectually protected him from the designs or the influence of neighbours. When his beautiful wife came to live there, with her pretty manners, her good taste, her possessions in the way of horses, dogs, flowers, everything she cared for, or that Paul's money could give her, certainly Red Towers would be very different then. No place could be dull where Celia was, and after all, she was not one of those women who depend on amusement, and are bored in the midst of it. Her temper was far too sweet and cheerful ; she would always be charming to everybody, and happy everywhere. When once all this tiresome bustle of preparations was over, and the ordeal of the wedding, then real happiness would begin, and go on shining to the end.

‘As for me, I’m morbid and unreasonable Mrs. Percival told me so,’ thought Paul ‘Why on earth can’t I shake off this stupid sort of nervousness! The Colonel doesn’t want me, because he’s ill, to go about as if the place was full of ghosts. One might really have a reason for being miserable. After all, there is only one person in the world who matters, and she might like somebody else better than me. And she doesn’t, and I am the happiest fellow in the whole world.’

He threw himself back in his chair, and looked round at his old dark walls and his bookcases. Colonel Ward’s hand had been everywhere; he had arranged the books, had hung up Paul’s pictures and other treasures over the mantelpiece; he had been here, as proud and contented as Sir Paul himself would have been, to welcome the

young fellow when he came home with his splendid degree.

‘I am glad they have let the old den alone,’ Paul thought. ‘I shall keep it always like this, if Celia doesn’t mind.’

Then he thought he would go and look at the other rooms ; so he took a candle and marched about their sounding emptiness, where there was not much to be seen. The solitary light shone faintly on new artistic colourings ; there was a fresh, damp, heartless smell of paint and plaster, and the air was very cold, though fires had been burning all day. Paul unbarred the shutters of one of the great windows, threw it open, and looked out into the night. The garden and the woods were still, and would have been in deep darkness but for the glimmer of a powdering of snow.



CHAPTER XVII.

A LETTER FROM CELIA.

EVERYONE expected more snow ; but that night it did not come, and the next day was very much the same, with grey thick clouds hanging low, and a creeping cold in the air which was not frost, but winter in its saddest aspect and feeling.

Colonel Ward's sick-room was perhaps the most cheerful place. He had slept at night, and all through the morning he was quite wide awake, and talked to Paul a great deal.

About twelve o'clock their talk was

interrupted by Dr. Graves, and Paul left him with his patient. When the doctor came downstairs the young Squire was walking about the garden in front, with a puzzled frown on his face.

Dick, jealous and unhappy at being shut out from his master, was lying on the doorstep; Jess was walking sedately after Paul; Punch and Judy were rolling over each other on the grass. When Dr. Graves came out these two rushed forward and jumped upon him. Dick looked at him fixedly with a low moan. Jess, as Paul stopped to speak to him, lay down and gazed into vacancy.

‘Good dogs, good dogs — there, get along,’ said the doctor. ‘Has Colonel Ward said anything to you about business, Mr. Romaine?’

‘Business? Well, yes,’ said Paul, flush-

ing a little as he looked at the doctor and wondered how much he knew. 'He has been talking all the morning about his will. I wish he wouldn't.'

'The sooner his mind is at rest the better.'

'Why? You don't think him worse?'

'Not absolutely worse, no; but I am not easy about him. He had better see his lawyer, and get things settled. He is in a state of nervous excitement about this will of his. Do you understand? Not that he says much to me about it; but if I were you, I should telegraph for Mr. Cole this afternoon.'

'If he suggests it himself, of course I must,' said Paul. 'But, you know, I must wait for that. From what he has been telling me, *I* can't lift a finger to hurry things. I am awfully afraid he is going to do something wrong.'

‘Leave his money to you, do you mean?’ said Dr. Graves, smiling.

‘Part of it, and—look here, you know, he must have some relations somewhere, though he says he hasn’t.’

Dr. Graves was a thin, grey-haired, practical man, much weather-beaten, and not very cheerful, perhaps from his complete honesty. He was rather cynical in his views of humanity, but he liked Paul Romaine, and had liked his father, seeing in them a clear sincerity, which was the only quality he respected. Colonel Ward also shared his esteem for the same reason. As a rule, Dr. Graves hated women; he said he could not understand them.

‘If I were you,’ said the doctor, ‘I should safely trust the Colonel not to do anything unfair. He is a just man—honourable, like your father.’

‘Yes, but it’s too much ; if you only knew, Dr. Graves——’

‘Don’t tell me ; I’m not curious, and I am in a great hurry. Colonel Ward is quite capable of managing his own affairs. For his sake, not for yours, I advise you to send that telegram.’

The Doctor was gone. Paul loitered about with the dogs a few minutes longer, and then went back to the Colonel’s room.

‘Colonel,’ he said, sitting down beside him, ‘I’ve got something serious to say.’

‘Out with it ; but I’m getting sleepy.’

‘If you really choose to do this for Celia, it is most awfully good of you. I don’t see how we are ever to thank you—but——’

‘Don’t bother,’ said the Colonel, rather wearily. ‘Think of me sometimes when

you think of your father, Paul. Poor Tom Darrell! I believe she was fond of him.'

Paul felt all the more anxious at this strange new gentleness. Lately, since he had made friends with Celia, Colonel Ward had not mentioned her father at all. In old days nothing was too bad for him.

'I was going to say,' said Paul, 'why should you leave the rest to me? Now do think that over, will you. There can be no hurry.'

'Yes, but there is,' said the Colonel, more wakefully. 'My memory's giving way. I wanted to tell you to telegraph to Cole at once. He will come down this afternoon, and the thing will be signed and done with. Then I shall be able to sleep quietly. Don't dispute. I can't stand it. Go away, there's a good fellow. Send the

telegram, and take yourself off for the afternoon. Barty will look after me.'

Barty's anxious face was already at the door, with something on a tray. Paul perceived that in truth the best and wisest thing was to take himself off, as the Colonel said. He went away to his own house; sent Ford off with the telegram to the lawyer, and after luncheon took his gun and went off into the woods with Dick and his own old retriever.

The fresh keen air, and the sweet scent of the woods, cold and silent as they were, did Paul's spirits good. The dogs ran about and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, without showing much surprise at the conduct of their unpractical master, who let birds fly away from under his feet, and did not even pay them the attention of a random shot. Sometimes, when the humour took him,

Paul could be rather a keen sportsman : his keeper respected him, if his groom did not. But to-day he seemed to forget that he had a gun in his hand at all. He wandered on through intricate miles of wood, thinking how astonished Celia would be when she heard of the Colonel's intention. Of course Celia did not and could not care for money ; but she cared very much for the things that money could bring. There would be hardly anything now that she might not have, if she chose. And then Paul thrust all these thoughts away with a sort of horror. After all, surely he had enough ; and Celia, he knew, would agree with him in dreading the time when that legacy should come to her. People must of course make their wills ; but a will was a ghastly thing at best ; it had better be put aside and forgotten. Celia must know ;

he could not help telling her ; but then the subject should never be mentioned again—not for years, he hoped—for it was very hard to imagine what life would be without the faithful old friend who had been so much to him since his father died. And then Paul assured himself that the Colonel was better ; that his good constitution would triumph, and he would live for years. If there was the slightest relapse, he determined to send for a London doctor to consult with Dr. Graves ; anyhow, perhaps this would be a good thing to do : and busy with all these thoughts, he went tramping on through the oak-scrub and heather, while pheasants looked at him from branches of trees, and rabbits hardly took the trouble to hide in their holes, till Dick or the old black dog came scrambling through the underwood.

Paul took a long round, and by the time

he came back to Red Towers, the sun had set and twilight had fallen. It was almost dark in the thicker part of the woods. He came through the gate at the end of the garden, and remembered a talk he had had with Celia, standing in that very corner, before the trees were leafless and the garden flowerless, while the Virginia creeper that covered part of the house was still clustering thick and rich, in its beautiful brown and red, on the old red bricks. It was bare now ; only the ivy remained, curling round corners and running up to the chimneys, with a deep green mass below, where a whole congregation of birds would build their nests next spring. Mrs. Sabin had not yet shut the long range of windows, and the workmen's ladders and planks were lying about on the grass outside, where there was still a little snow.

There had been a peculiar sweetness about Celia that September day, the day after she arrived at Holm. She was good that day, as well as happy. Paul remembered how she had told him that she could be perfectly happy in the dear old house as it was, if he in the least disliked its being altered; as to the study, she 'would not have it touched for worlds.'

Paul liked to remind himself of her words; she had said them, she had meant them, though possibly she might have forgotten them now. And after that, she had talked to him very sweetly, with a deeper show of feeling than was usual with her, and then they had gone on into the yard together, and then Colonel Ward appeared and was conquered. Yes, she was the sweetest, dearest, best woman in the world; and the man to whom she had given herself had

certainly no excuse for any feeling but the most intense happiness. His life was going to be something beyond imagination ; and in this bright future it now seemed impossible that the dear old Colonel would be absent. He and his dogs must come in at the gate as in old days. Paul and Celia, as they loitered about next summer in their garden full of roses, must surely see that little company advancing.

It was as if a sudden clash of joy-bells had broken in on Paul's melancholy mood ; that wintry twilight garden might have been flooded with a miracle of sunshine. His eyes brightened, he pulled himself together, as the future gave him these dazzling glimpses of itself ; he whistled to the dogs, and walked across the lawn with a light quick step.

‘ Any sport, sir ? ’ asked Sabin, meeting him in the hall.

‘No ; I didn’t try to hit anything,’ Paul said, laying his gun down. ‘Has there been any message from the Cottage this afternoon?’

‘No, sir ; but a gentleman’s come down from London to see the Colonel, and I rather think he’s there now. There’s a letter for you, sir, on the study table.’

Sabin smiled. He lingered a moment, looking after his young master as he went into the study. But then the door was shut, and there was no more to be seen.

It was a letter from Paris, from Celia. No wonder Paul had felt happy as he came near the house. So she had been writing to him yesterday, when he was writing to her. She had not promised to write yesterday, but she had been better than her word ; it was like Celia.

He threw himself into an arm-chair by

the fire, and opened his letter. The first look that crossed his face and dimmed the smile away was one of complete bewilderment, for the letter had no beginning.

The beginning of Celia's letters was always 'My dear Paul.' He had remonstrated before now, and begged for something more ; but she had laughed and said that she could not imagine anything more. As he did not seem satisfied, she went on to explain, with laughing eyes :

' Mine—my dear ! How can one say anything nicer than that ? I despise " dearest " and " darling." In fact, I think they are rather insulting, as if it was necessary to exaggerate. To me " my dear " means infinitely more.'

' So it does, when you say it like that,' Paul was obliged to confess, and he never complained again.

But this letter from Paris had not even the plain beginning that Celia liked. There was something very mysterious about it altogether. Every word of it seemed more puzzling than the last, and as Paul read on, and read to the end, his bewilderment became hopeless.

The letter was not dated, and this was the way it began :

‘ ——— I have put off writing to you, and you are calling me horrid and heartless ; but who was it, I wonder, who kindly told me once that I was as cold as a fish, and as hard as a stone ? And how can you expect anything from a person with such a character ? At first, I thought I would not write to you at all, for it was stupid of you, as well as wrong, to write that letter to me ; but I suppose silence is a worse punishment than

you deserve, and there are other reasons. By the time you get this I hope I shall be married, or at any rate it will be too late for you to interfere. I told you before, and I tell you again, that I like my prospects very much. A fish is satisfied with plenty of water to swim in, and a stone has not the bother of being in love. A stone is lazy too, I should think, and would not care to dig itself up and tear about the world for anybody. Don't you begin to see now what nonsense your letter was? I know, don't I, when I am well off? At the same time, hoping that we may never meet again—at least, till you have forgotten to be silly, and have married some more self-denying girl—I will confess that if I *could* be in love, it would be with you, and not with him. I don't mind telling you that, because you think you know it already, and I suppose

you are not far wrong. My marriage of course has no love in it, but it is a very good thing for me. I like to be rich, I like to be comfortable, and I like to be spoilt. There is nothing good in me. Your wife, when you have been married to her a year or two, will have to be a very good woman indeed. The man I am going to marry will always worship me, and will not expect much in return. At the same time, if I was a braver woman, I suppose I might possibly throw him over, and marry you. But as things are, my dearest, no. Don't write to me again ; it is too late, and we have done with each other for ever now.

‘ Yours always,

‘ CELIA.’

Paul read this letter twice through, first quickly, then slowly, without the faintest

idea that it was meant for anyone but him. Then he took up the envelope and looked at it vaguely : ‘ Paul Romaine, Esq., Red Towers,’ and so on ; that was all right : and he began to read the letter again. As he became more fully conscious that he did not understand a single word of it, there came over him a feeling of terrible oppression, a feeling of being stifled in a black fog ; and then the thought flashed upon him that he was going out of his mind. He laid the letter down, got up from his chair and walked round the room two or three times : then he took down a book from the shelves. ‘ If I am mad,’ he thought, ‘ I shall not understand this.’ He stood still, and forced himself to read half a page, giving it his full attention ; it was perfectly clear to him ; and long afterwards, when that terrible evening had been left years behind, he re-

membered the book—it was Matthew Arnold's 'Essays in Criticism'—and could almost have said that half-page by heart. Then he went back to Celia's letter, and began to read it a fourth time, with a clear and resolute intention to understand every word of it, and to know the worst ; for he still supposed that the letter was meant for him.

Understand it ! but that was not so easy, with the strongest resolution and the clearest brain, for it was as full of mysteries as ever. Some great trouble was evidently wrapped up in it ; but why, whatever she had done or meant to do, should Celia have put things in such an extraordinary way ?

She had not put off writing to him ; nothing had been farther from his thoughts than to call her 'horrid and heartless.' As to those strange remarks about stones and

fishes, he fancied he had heard her say something of the kind before, but could not very well remember what. His letter! Was that yesterday's letter? But she had not received it. And what in the world did she mean about her marriage, and about this other man, whom she was not in love with—he hoped not, indeed.

‘Did I ever want her to be self-denying?’ thought poor Paul. ‘And who could possibly worship her more than I do?’

Too late! Not write to her again! Done with each other for ever! The mystery was indeed too deep to be understood. And then to sign herself ‘Yours always,’ and to call him ‘my dearest,’ when she was bringing everything to an end in this overwhelming way! To be sure she had drawn her pen through that ‘my dearest’ lightly, as if by a casual after-

thought of her own inconsistency ; but still she had written it, and had left it there. Though she did not say so plainly, the whole letter seemed to imply that she was going to be married immediately to someone else—so immediately, that Paul's writing to her would be of no use. And yet she seemed miserable, and she said plainly that she liked him best.

‘I must go,’ said Paul. ‘The Colonel is certainly better. Can't I catch the night-mail at Charing Cross ? Anyhow, I'll try for it. Cole will surely be ready to go back by the 5.50, and Ford can drive us down in half an hour.’

To Ford's great satisfaction, he had been employed that autumn to buy a fast-trotting cob for the little dog-cart, and this animal did his twelve miles an hour easily.

Paul rang the bell, and Sabin appeared

at the door that same moment with a message.

‘Would you kindly step over to the Cottage, sir. Colonel Ward would be glad to see you. Did you ring, sir?’ as Paul stared at him rather blankly.

‘Tell Mrs. Sabin to pack my bag, will you. I may have to go away to-night. Tell Ford to have the cart ready. I shall want to catch the 5.50.’

Having given his orders, the Squire went out, walking with long hurried steps to the Cottage. Just outside the door he tumbled over Dick, who was waiting for him, and kicked him severely. The poor dog was too brave to cry out, but looked up for the kind words that ought to have followed. Paul strode on, however, without taking any notice of him, and Dick slunk after disconsolate.

Sabin went back to his wife and feared that the master had had bad news from Paris.

‘He was as jolly as you please when he first came in,’ said he ; ‘but now his face is as white and his eyes like burning coals, so as you never saw the like. I hope his young lady ain’t a-quarrelling with him.’

‘And going off to-night ! That do look serious,’ Mrs. Sabin agreed. ‘I shouldn’t have believed he’d have left the Colonel, and him with one foot in the grave, as you may say.’

‘Well, it’s a sing’lar thing,’ said Sabin.

Paul, meanwhile, with his letter in his pocket, arrived at the Cottage, and went upstairs to the Colonel’s room. Dr. Graves met him in the passage and stopped him for a moment.

‘You here again !’ said Paul.

‘I was passing on my way back, and thought I would look in,’ said the doctor. ‘He is not quite so well—rather too much excited. I shall be glad when this will business is over and done with.’

‘Why the devil couldn’t it have been left alone altogether!’ said Paul, looking on the ground.

Dr. Graves glanced at him sharply.

‘Well, he wants you,’ he said. ‘I shall wait downstairs for the present. I have got to witness the will, it seems, and I want to see him again afterwards.’

The doctor passed on. Paul stood still a moment outside the door, trying to collect his thoughts, and to feel like himself again. The sight of his dear old Colonel was more calming than anything else could have been.

He was lying propped up with pillows ;

his face was flushed, and looked drawn and weary ; his voice sounded weak and strained. The room was full of bright fire and lamp-light ; on the further side of the bed Mr. Cole, the lawyer—a very solemn and business-like personage—was writing at a table. Paul walked round and shook hands with him.

‘ Mr. Cole has raised a question, Paul, that you must answer,’ said Colonel Ward. ‘ He asked me whether the legacy to Miss Celia Darrell was to be conditional on her marriage with you. After a moment’s consideration I thought it was best to consult you.’

The Colonel smiled as he looked at Paul. Mr. Cole also fixed his eyes on the young man, standing at the foot of the bed, with the slightest quiver of amusement about his grave mouth. To Paul only the question

did not seem any matter of amusement. He stood there looking down ; and if the Colonel's eyes had had their old brightness, the shadow that had fallen upon Paul would certainly not have escaped them. His look was dark and gloomy ; he lifted his hand to his face as if to hide something, and stood slouching there, leaning the other hand on the bed-post.

‘ Conditional on her marriage with me ? ’ he repeated, and he seemed to speak with a slight effort. ‘ I don't quite understand.’

‘ Yes, you do, my boy,’ said the Colonel impatiently. ‘ You might die, or she might change her mind—I'm talking nonsense, of course. Now, I should wish her to have seventy thousand in any case ; I only want to know if you agree with me. It is only a formality ; it doesn't imply any doubt of your marriage coming off, you understand, Paul.’

‘Whether our marriage comes off or not, it can make no difference, surely,’ said Paul; and Mr. Cole stared at him still more curiously than before.

Perhaps it crossed his mind that Miss Darrell, with seventy thousand pounds, might easily find a more cheerful mate than this dark-looking fellow.

‘That is just what I think,’ said Colonel Ward. ‘Now go away, and we will finish this business. Ask the doctor if he can wait half an hour.’

Paul hesitated a moment; but he could say nothing about the 5.50 train, though it seemed to him as if the minutes were tearing on. Perhaps he might have to start off without telling the Colonel, or seeing him again. Was that possible?

Before joining Dr. Graves in the drawing-room he took out Celia’s letter, and read it

once more under the lamp in the hall. Any chance of understanding it seemed more remote than ever. He could recognise neither her nor himself; and that other man, 'the man I am going to marry,' was like some black spectre of an unknown creation.

He went into the drawing-room, and for the next half-hour tried to talk politics to Dr. Graves, who put down his abstraction to the account of Colonel Ward's will, and thought he was a very queer fellow.





CHAPTER XVIII.

‘ HE IS ONE OF THOSE WHO ARE BEAUTIFUL AND
HAPPY.’

MORE than half an hour had slipped by, before Barty called Dr. Graves to witness the Colonel’s signature. As the doctor was leaving the room, he turned round and said to Paul, ‘ I wish I could stay here to-night. But I have a patient at Wilford whom I am still more anxious about. You will be here? I dare say you could sit with him part of the night? If there is any change, send for me at once.’

‘ Yes, I shall be here. I will sit up

with him,' said Paul, almost in spite of himself.

He saw that the doctor was very uneasy, and he felt it impossible, whatever his own wish—almost necessity—might be, to leave his old friend's death-bed for an explanation with Celia. If she was taking some cruel advantage of his absence, why, she must take it ; she no doubt felt that he was safe away, and she was right. He could not fail the Colonel at this time, even if the alternative was losing her. Then he thought of her unwillingness that he should come away ; what did that mean ? did she want him to save her from herself ? What could possibly be the motive that was leading her, if she did not care for this other man ? Money ? but had not Paul himself enough to give her everything she wanted ? Then Paul resolved that he would distract

himself with these questions no more. No one could give him the answers but Celia herself; and as he could not fly to her to-night without behaving cruelly and selfishly, he must leave his fate in her hands—Mrs. Percival had once told him that he ought to trust her. This letter was certainly a supreme difficulty, and yet its strange expressions seemed to mean that after all she loved him. ‘Yours always:’ these words especially were a ray of light through very dark clouds.

While Paul waited for the doctor and Mr. Cole to come down, he wrote a telegram and a short letter to Celia. The telegram was :

‘What does your letter mean? Do nothing till I see you.’

The letter :

‘ MY DARLING,

‘ Yours is the most puzzling letter I have ever received. I have read it twenty times, and understand it no better. I almost started off at once, but the Colonel is too ill for me to leave him. Please write and tell me what your letter really means. Sometimes I think you may have written it by way of a joke ; but that would not be like you. Anyhow, I don’t understand a word of it. The house is getting on well ; I think you will like it. I have been for a long walk in the woods this afternoon ; when I came back I found your letter, which quite knocked me down, but I am gradually coming to think that it is some extraordinary piece of utter nonsense, which I am too stupid to understand. Why did you write it ?

‘ Your faithful and devoted

‘ PAUL ROMAINE.’

The writing of this letter to Celia did Paul's spirits a little good. When one is hurt by the person one loves best, the only comforting thing, perhaps, is to go and tell that same person all about it. Any amount of sympathy from other people is of no use ; we want to be healed by the same hand that wounded us ; then the wound is nothing.

Having appealed in this way to his love against herself, Paul resolved that he would not read that letter of hers again till he had her answer to this he had just written ; and so, having put his trouble under lock and key, he was ready, when Dr. Graves came down, to meet him with a quiet countenance, and to take his directions for the night in a less absent manner than before.

Ford drove off to the station, with Mr. Cole and the telegram ; the letter went to

the post. Dr. Graves also drove away, though in evident anxiety ; and as night closed in upon the lonely common, under the dark, snow-laden sky, the sick man lay quiet and contented and watched Paul as he sat by the fire, with Di at his feet, his shadow hardly moving on the wall.

He was not to talk ; the doctor had said so ; and indeed the Colonel was too tired to talk ; and Paul, though wide awake, wished for nothing better than to sit there, and wait, and watch the red toppling castles in the fire. Here he was, after all ; and a few hours ago he had fancied himself tearing through another night journey, on business which might perhaps, he thought, be truly enough described as ‘of life and death.’ No, rather of life alone ; and that was why he found himself still here ; because there were times when death must be stronger

than life, and must claim and use its power.

As Paul sat through the hours of that night, in silence only disturbed by the Colonel's heavy breathing, and a sigh now and then from the dog, he began thinking over the past year of his life ; the first, the only year, it seemed to him, in which he had really lived ; for it was not much more than a year since he first saw Celia.

In those days, when she came to live with her aunt, soon after her father's death, Celia had lost for a time the sunny pleasantness which most people thought her chief charm. Her smiles shone through a cloud of impatient sadness. It was not at once that she began to be happy without her father, whose loss, with all his faults, had been the one great trouble of her life. But even then she liked Paul's admiration,

though she took little notice of him. It was not till some months later that some hint about Paul from her aunt made her seriously think of marrying him. He was not exactly the sort of man who amused her, of course ; but she was clever enough to know, not being in love with anybody, that the sort of man who amused her now was not the sort that would spoil her thoroughly and make her happy always ; and so she was invariably nice to Paul, and let him drift on into that perfect devotion which she meant to reward by-and-by.

Paul looked back on those months now, and wondered to think how smoothly the course of his love had run. At the time he had been plagued with anxiety—he could not persuade himself that Celia could ever think him worthy of her ; the hard work for his degree was easy and delightful,

because, in his own estimation at least, it brought him nearer Celia. Then came his triumph; then they sent him off abroad; then followed those few strange days at Woolsborough, when he could not quite understand Celia's doings, entirely as he trusted her. That Saturday, when she was out with Vincent; that Sunday, when she sent him out of Vincent's way—every look and word of hers at that time came back very vividly now. Vincent's sulky face—certainly his going to India had been a great relief, and everything had gone on perfectly well since. One or two little clouds, but they were not worth remembering. Perhaps they had been woven out of Paul's own morbid fancy. Mrs. Percival would certainly say so. But now this letter!

For a short time the thought of the letter had been numbed, as it were—driven away

into the land of dreams by these recollections on which Paul's mind had been dwelling. Now it came back with a sudden sting of pain. In its unnatural mystery it was itself like a bad dream. Paul had resolved not to make sure of its reality by reading it again ; but there was no need for that. He knew every word of it too well. It was plain that no thinking could help him to understand it ; and yet, as he frowned over the thought of it, something darted suddenly through his mind. It was one of those flashes of thought, those intuitions, which come and go almost too quickly to print themselves on one's consciousness, and Paul had no time to pursue it then, though somehow he knew that it caused him no surprise, and was only the withdrawing of a veil. The Colonel stirred and spoke, so low that Paul could not hear him without coming to the bed.

'Beat your trouble; don't let it beat you,' he was saying. 'If you can't have what you want, go without it, and don't cry for the moon. You can do your duty in the dark, I suppose. Don't be a coward. Why shouldn't she know best? Percival may be a better man. At any rate she thinks so, and she has a right to her opinion.'

His eyes were open, and he looked at Paul while he said these things, speaking in short, broken sentences. Paul knew that he was talking to himself; wandering a little, perhaps, for he evidently expected no reply. His mind had gone back to his own younger days, and this sound advice was meant for no one but himself; he had indeed turned it into practice, and lived on it all through his faithful life. But little as the Colonel dreamed it, while his eyelids drooped again, and he fell once more into his heavy, un-

conscious sleep, the words had a meaning too for his lad who was watching him. All unknowing, the Colonel had brought a message to Paul, of which not one word was mistaken or out of place. The thing had already flashed through Paul's brain as he sat by the fire, and the Colonel's words only confirmed it. After a minute, he moved back to his chair by the fire, and deliberately breaking his resolution of the evening, took out Celia's letter and read it once again. He understood it now ; he knew that he was reading a letter not written to himself, but to Vincent Percival. In this new light every word was clear.

It was characteristic of Paul that the discovery of Celia's falseness, the great shock which changed all his life, was met at once in the spirit of a strong man, rather than of a passionate boy. Till now, Celia had in-

fluenced and played with the weakest part of his nature ; her magic had been at work, smiling and stroking down into slavery every independent thought ; but she had not yet conquered his whole nature so far that he could not rise and shake himself, like a hero of old, and go out scornfully, when he saw that he had been deceived.

The letter, as he read it now, was a full and clear explanation of Celia, and her reasons for marrying him. All that had ever puzzled him was explained by this letter. The Celia he had loved and trusted did not exist at all—*this* was Celia. It was incredible, but true ; and none the less certain, because it seemed impossible.

In the long, dark silence of that night, Paul had plenty of time to study the different aspects of this great surprise which had come upon him. For it was a great surprise ;

though at the first moment he had felt that he had known it all along, and that his misgivings, which seemed so unreasonable, his consciousness of something, some barrier between himself and Celia—her own quick words now and then, when even she herself revolted at deceiving him—all these, a hundred little thoughts, acts, sayings, which had seemed mere fancy or insignificant nonsense at the time, were only flashes of light from the truth so carefully hidden.

‘I have been a fool—an utter fool!’ Paul told himself, as he sat over the fire with his face buried in his hands.

The Colonel dying, Celia dead; it certainly was a night to be remembered. His thoughts wandered back to the Colonel’s own old troubles, of which he spoke so bravely. His example might be worth following—and yet there was no comparison.

The Colonel had never been engaged to Mrs. Percival ; she had never deceived him ; she had flirted with him a little, perhaps, according to her nature, but nothing more. Her marriage was a disappointment, and a very cruel one ; but not an injury. It was not a desecration, a sin against faith and trust and everything that was good.

What would the Colonel say, if he knew about Celia ? Paul now thought, with a kind of horror, that he might recover, that he might have to know. How would it be possible to tell him ? How could anyone be told these things against Celia ? The world might find out for itself, Paul thought : he would not say a word on the subject, except to Celia herself. And as to her—of course it would be easier to escape to the other side of the world, and never see her again. It was a temptation ; for a short letter,

enclosing this mis-sent letter of hers, would be explanation enough ; but Paul resolved that he must see her, and hear the truth from herself. Besides, her letter to this other man—Vincent Percival, he felt sure, though without any proof—made it clear that she, for her part, had not the slightest intention of breaking off her engagement. She must know Paul's view of this. She would be glad, no doubt, to be so easily rid of an encumbrance ; and it would not matter to her at all now. That last thought, painful as it was in some ways, had at least the advantage of setting Paul free.

In the midst of these thoughts he fell asleep for about ten minutes, unnoticed by the faithful Di, who had closed her own watchful eyes some time before, thinking that he was to be trusted. A most happy and deceiving little dream ended in a sudden

waking ; he thought Celia's hand was on his shoulder ; but looking up with a start he saw that it was Barty, and remembered everything again.

'Better go and lie down, sir,' Barty whispered, proceeding to make up the fire. 'I ain't going to bed, and it's no use you sitting here. It's three o'clock, and snowing fast ; been snowing for hours. Three to four inches already on the flat, and now it's drifting a bit, as you may hear by the moan o' the wind.'

'Is it ?' said Paul. 'No, I'll sit up, thank you. The Colonel is still asleep. He spoke once ; but I think he was wandering.'

A flame leaped suddenly up in the dimly-lighted room, the wind gave a louder cry, and a soft shower made the window-panes rattle. Di sat up, turning her head to the

bed, and gave a long, low howl. Paul got up, leaving Barty still kneeling on the hearthrug, went across to the bed, and bent over the Colonel in his deep sleep : all these little sounds had not disturbed him.

Paul bent over that motionless figure, and his own heart seemed to stand still.

‘ Barty—come here,’ he said, with a quick terror in his voice.

To this day, Ford the groom is not tired of telling the story of his walk down through the lanes to Wilford that December morning, to fetch Dr. Graves. It seemed useless to attempt riding, for in the hollow lanes near Holm Common the snow lay deep, and even on the higher ground it balled, so that a horse could hardly get along. Those six miles, that morning, were as bad as twelve. Ford hardly

thought the doctor would come, though the Squire said he must ; but in this Ford did injustice to the doctor's pluck and endurance. He started off in his dogcart without any hesitation, and to Ford's surprise, his horse, as courageous as himself, struggled on somehow to the foot of the Holm lanes. There he had to leave him at a farmhouse, and walked the rest of the way with Ford to the Cottage.

What the doctor feared, and could not guard against, had happened sooner than he expected ; another stroke, coming in the Colonel's sleep, had deepened it into death. No care, no watching could have saved him ; Dr. Graves assured Paul earnestly of this, when he accused himself of having fallen asleep in his chair.

They were standing together by the fire in the dining-room, having come down

from the sad room upstairs. It was nearly eight o'clock ; and the dismal light of dawn, white and dreary with snow, was beginning to shine in through the shutters. The doctor, brisk and rosy from his walk, looked with a certain anxiety at Paul, who stood like a man who was trying to bear a great load of pain.

‘ Of course the Colonel was like a father to him,’ Dr. Graves reflected, and he felt a great deal more sympathy than he showed in his manner, while Paul talked over arrangements with him in an abstracted sort of way.

Paul had everything to do. He was Colonel Ward’s sole executor ; beyond the legacy to Celia, and two or three small ones, everything was left to him ; thus all the affairs seemed to be his, and no friend or relation was likely to come forward with a nearer interest.

After talking for some minutes, Paul sat down and began to write telegrams—to Canon Percival, Mr. Bailey, Mr. Cole, and two or three other people who seemed to occur to him at the moment.

‘To-day is Friday. Next Wednesday, you think?’ he said, looking up at the doctor.

‘Perhaps you had better consult—Mr. Cole, at any rate,’ said Dr. Graves, staring at him.

There was an odd impatience in the young man’s manner, he thought ; he had met with many kinds of grief in his experience, but here was a touch of something new, which puzzled him.

‘It is notice enough for him,’ said Paul, and he went on writing.

‘Very imperious,’ thought the doctor.

‘And there are your friends in Paris,’ he

suggested, as Paul pushed the telegrams away. ‘Are they at all likely to—to come over? Excuse me—but one has to think of everything, difficult as it is.’

For a moment Paul sat stooping over the table without saying anything. Then he looked up at the doctor, and his eyes were rather fierce.

‘I must go to Paris,’ he said quickly. ‘No use telegraphing; I must go to-day. If I can get there to-night, I may be back to-morrow night. At latest, I will be back on Sunday. Any orders that must be given, will you give them for me, Dr. Graves? I shall think it very friendly of you if you will.’

‘My dear sir,’ said Dr. Graves with a queer smile, ‘do you think this is quite wise? I am ready to do anything I can, of course; but I should have thought a visit

to Paris—partly because you are not well, you are highly excited, and tearing about in this fashion is very bad for you—in short, it is unadvisable for many reasons. Why can't you wait till the end of next week ?'

'Because I have business in Paris which won't wait till the end of next week,' said Paul quickly. He raised his face, which was very pale, and, as he looked up into the doctor's puzzled countenance, his eyes softened, and he almost smiled. 'I didn't consult you, Dr. Graves,' he said ; 'I only asked if you would do my work for me. This is a thing which concerns no one but myself. Bailey will help me, if you won't.'

The doctor was going to speak, but checked himself, smiled a little satirically, and rang the bell.

‘ I am going to order breakfast,’ he said. ‘ If you mean to catch the up-train you have no time to lose.’

‘ Now which is the worst, a lover’s quarrel, or the death of an old friend ?’ thought Dr. Graves half an hour later, as he stood at the gate and watched Paul Romaine striding off across the the snow-covered common.

All the clouds had cleared away ; the sun, lately risen, was sending beautiful light over a dazzling world. Paul had determined to walk all the way to the station, in spite of Ford’s remonstrances.

Dr. Graves need not have been quite so cynical. As the young fellow plunged through the deep track in the hollow lane, with his face to the rosy radiance of the east, his thoughts had not gone before him to Paris, but had stayed behind in that low,

quiet, darkened room, where lonely Di lay watching her dear master. Where was the Colonel now? In the 'land o' the leal,' Paul thought, wherever that may be; in that very distant country where nothing selfish, or cruel, or false can ever find its way.





CHAPTER XIX.

AN EVENING WITH MADAME DE FERRAND.

MADAME DE FERRAND was sitting on a long sofa at the end of her *salon*, talking to Mrs. Percival. Her rooms and herself had the same air of simple distinction. She was one of the real great ladies of Paris ; but she was not rich, and was far too proud for any pretences or affectations. In France, in a time like the present, when there is no Court, and therefore no organized society, thousands of people take titles without any right to them, and whole fabrics of false greatness are built up on a foundation of

money. But in spite of all this, the old noble families can hold their own ; they have a position, and they have influence, though they often do not claim the one, or use the other. But in truth, no French politicians have yet been able to destroy French history, or to take those old names out of the native atmosphere in which they live.

There sat little Madame de Ferrand in her plain old room, without any of the ordinary adornments of Paris life, with her pale smiling face, and grey hair, and black lace cap, and straight black gown. There were plenty of women in Paris, with ten times her fortune, magnificent women on whom the crowd looked with envy, who would have given a good deal to find themselves sitting beside that old Vicomtesse, on her chintz-covered *canapé*.

But Madame de Ferrand, agreeable, tolerant, religious, amusing, altogether delightful as she was, was also perfectly exclusive. She was supposed to live very quietly in her corner of the Faubourg, to go nowhere and see nobody ; the fact was that all the best people in Paris came regularly to see her ; and an invitation to dinner from Madame de Ferrand was a sort of testimonial, for unlike many ladies of her kind, she thought quite as much of people's moral character as of their names.

In asking Mrs. Percival and Miss Darrell to dine with her that evening, Madame de Ferrand was of course indulging the amiable eccentricity of her son-in-law. She did not personally care much for English people ; they always seemed to her unfinished, the women especially ; and Mrs. Percival, sitting radiant in her best Paris gown beside the

little Vicomtesse, would have been surprised and shocked if she could have read the thoughts hidden behind those pleasant smiles and pretty chatterings.

‘Poor woman ! a little *bourgeoise*, like so many of them, and so much too smart for the occasion. But a good woman, poor thing, and no doubt passable in her own country. The girl is better than her aunt—rather distinguished, really. Achille thinks her a wonderful beauty—partly his English craze, of course—but still——’

Madame de Ferrand was very fond of her son-in-law, and did all she could to keep up her influence over him, partly for the sake of his daughter, who was the one object of her interest and love and care. Antoinette had told her grandmother, not without tears, of the scene at La Tour Blanche, her own misery, her father’s goodness. She was

now beginning to see that she might have been a little selfish ; but still her father's promise that these ideas should be given up for her sake seemed to lie warm at her heart, and made her too happy for any deep repentance. Grandmamma looked into the pleading eyes, and kissed the two flushed cheeks, and laughed any lingering trouble away. It appeared that she was quite ready to join Antoinette's father in spoiling the child ; but a few among Madame de Ferrand's friends knew that she seriously meant her son-in-law to marry again one of these days, and quite understood that, in her mind at least, the idea was only laid aside for the present.

At the other end of Madame de Ferrand's *salon*, Antoinette, a good deal tied up with blue ribbons, was showing Celia a book of old caricatures. Celia, in a simple white

dress, looked very young and very lovely. The two heads—dark and golden—were a pretty contrast as they bent over the book. Antoinette clapped her hands and went into small peals of laughter, sometimes more at her companion's remarks than at the pictures themselves, for Celia seemed to throw herself into this form of amusement as if there was nothing in the world she cared for more, and all sorts of new meanings seemed to come dancing out of the funny ugly old pictures as those blue eyes studied them, and that pretty, clever mouth went on talking.

‘What vivacity she has, your beautiful niece!’ said Madame de Ferrand in her quiet little voice to Mrs. Percival, at the other end of the long room.

‘She has always been a favourite with other young people,’ said Mrs. Percival, smiling, and looking delighted.

‘She amuses herself most amiably with my little Antoinette : a charming temper evidently,’ said the Vicomtesse ; and then she went on to ask one or two questions about Celia’s engagement, which M. de Montmirail had explained to her.

‘Is he on the whole a little young for her ? Not in years, I mean,’ she said in the lowest of tones, with a playful smile. ‘Of course it is only an old woman’s fancy ; a stranger, who knows how to admire, however——’

‘Well, possibly,’ Mrs. Percival confessed. ‘They are in fact just the same age ; but he is boyish, I dare say. He has a great deal of character though, and—I assure you, for a girl in her position, poor child, her prospects are very good indeed.’

‘Such looks might make a young lady independent of any position, madame,’ said

the Vicomtesse. 'At least my son-in-law tells me that in England it would be so. In France I fear we are less romantic. No doubt there is something to be said on both sides.'

Madame de Ferrand then went on to discuss the education of girls, and Mrs. Percival listened smilingly, without attempting any argument; she wisely thought that this was impossible between two people who saw things from entirely different points of view.

In her own mind, Mrs. Percival was by no means at ease about Celia, and was inclined to be angry with her, though she enjoyed Madame de Ferrand's admiration, and shared it too. If she had known all, she might have admired Celia for a self-control of which she herself, in like circumstances, would hardly have been capable. It was

now just twenty-four hours since Celia had received that telegram from Paul, following on his first letter full of affection and confidence. Celia had read the letter once through, smiled over it, and then laid it aside. Paul's rhapsodies were only strings of words to her ; and she liked him better than his letters. But the telegram was rather a different thing. She received it when she was alone in her room ; and this was fortunate, as she certainly would not have cared to explain it to her aunt. She sat and looked at it for a few minutes, with a sort of singing in her ears, and a shiver that ran all over her ; for the first time in her life, perhaps, Celia was terrified. As soon as she had collected her wits a little, having instantly known what she had done, she went to her writing-case to make things certain. Of course it was so ; her letter to

Paul, a commonplace history of what they had done since he went away, with the necessary inquiries for Colonel Ward, was lying there between the leaves; the rough sketch of a letter which she had scribbled to Vincent was gone—gone into the wrong hands; gone to the very last person who was meant to see it, without a name or a beginning to prevent him from reading it—gone to spoil everything, to take away Celia's future that she had chosen for herself, to throw her back into chance, and dependence, and poverty, unless she could in some way recover her footing, and escape the consequences of such a fatal and ridiculous mistake.

What was to be done? For once in her life Celia was thoroughly puzzled, as well as furious with herself for her carelessness. She knew exactly how it had happened.

She had been called away in a hurry to see a milliner who could not wait, and had folded her sheet of paper without looking at it, and sent Timms down to post the letter, with the real intention to please Paul and make him happy in his banishment. And now she had brought this upon herself. Well, it was a triumph for Vincent; she supposed that his letter would have to be answered in a different way now. But at this moment she felt angry with Vincent, who had brought her into this horrible scrape, and was very sure she did not care enough for him to wait three years, and was determined, if by any means it was possible, to have her own way still. Paul—the most devoted lover that a girl ever had—her slave, in fact; faithful to her in every thought; gentle, generous, unselfish—he and herself must both be changed, indeed,

if she could not keep him where he was, at her feet, without any great trouble of explaining what could not be explained. One thing was very clear: she would not have any correspondence on the subject. Paul must come back to her, and then she was sure of her power; she could soon convince him, then, that the silly letter meant anything, or nothing. So, in answer to that telegram, she wrote just three lines:

‘MY DEAREST PAUL,—Come back, and I will tell you all about it. I want you dreadfully.—Your own loving

‘CELIA.’

When this was safely posted, she told herself that all would be right now. But perhaps one’s moral character always takes a little revenge, when one tries harder than usual to drag it down. She could not sleep

that night, and was in a restless temper all the next day. Paul's letter, which came in the afternoon, irritated her still further, though it was comforting in one way ; whatever he thought, however deeply he was mystified, it was plain that he suspected nothing.

Celia was out shopping with Mrs. Percival all that day, and insisted on one or two pieces of rather wild extravagance, which surprised and annoyed her aunt a little. She was also curiously changeable, and gave a great deal of trouble in the shops. As they drove home she said to Mrs. Percival, 'And suppose this wedding never comes off after all !'

'Then, my dear,' said her aunt, 'I know whose fault it will be.'

'Whose ?'

'Yours, of course.'

Celia laughed, and after that recovered herself. In fact, during the rest of the day her spirits were so unusually high that Mrs. Percival, who thought a good deal of Paul and the dear old Colonel, was obliged to confess to herself that Celia was rather heartless. However, she was glad that her niece should appear to advantage at Madame de Ferrand's in the evening, and watched with amusement the admiring glances of the two Frenchmen, M. de Montmirail and his friend M. de Cernay, the ugly and good-natured, who had come to the Deux Frères for a day or two, and was highly entertained by meeting the two English ladies at dinner. He, however, did not venture once to address Celia, who, for her part, was quite clever enough not to shock Madame de Ferrand by any English forwardness, and though quite ready to talk to

the Marquis, kept her prettiest smiles for Antoinette.

After dinner, in the smoking-room, Miss Celia Darrell was for a long time the subject of talk between M. de Cernay and M. de Montmirail. M. de Cernay found his friend's admiration a little too enthusiastic, having himself no English mania.

‘If the young lady had been rich, as they generally are,’ he reflected—‘and if she had not been engaged to a respectable Englishman, I suspect *la petite* Antoinette might tear her hair in vain, and we might find ourselves with an English Protestant neighbour.’

M. de Cernay made faces at the bare idea of such a catastrophe, but did not hint his suspicions to Achille, who was a little high-flown, and might have resented them.

He watched his friend rather carefully, however, through the rest of the evening. Of course there was no real danger, as Miss Darrell was engaged ; but in spite of this, M. de Cernay felt that he would have a good deal of interesting description to take home to his wife. She had always said that the dear Marquis, in spite of all his cheerful and dignified philosophy, would fall foolishly in love some day.

They played that evening at Madame de Ferrand's favourite Spanish game of 'reversi.' Mrs. Percival was rather stupid, but Celia learned it with astonishing quickness, and they laughed a great deal, while Antoinette looked over their shoulders. She had quite lost her heart to Celia, who for her part was delighted with these dear, good-humoured people, and would have really been as happy as she looked, if that

cloud had not been hanging on her horizon. As she sat there at Madame de Ferrand's card-table, her thoughts were wandering between three subjects—the game she was playing; calculations as to when her letter would reach Paul; and M. de Montmirail, the expression of whose eyes when they met hers was, to say the least, amusing. He did not mean it, of course, for he was the soul of honour. Celia thought him wonderfully handsome; she reflected what a chevalier he would have made in the olden time, dressed in silks and satins and feathers. He was certainly much handsomer than Vincent, she thought, and much pleasanter to look at. Older, of course; but he looked younger, for his face was smooth and happy, while Vincent's was worn by ill-temper and a hot climate. Then she inwardly laughed at herself for the com-

parison, and smiled frankly at the Marquis, and went on playing her game, while that ugly little M. de Cernay talked in low tones to Madame de Ferrand, and watched her all the time.

Rather early in the evening they were interrupted. A note was brought in to M. de Montmirail, who looked at it, begged his mother-in-law to excuse him for an instant, and went out of the room. As he got up from the table he glanced at Celia ; it was a grave, startled, quite different look, and she knew instantly that in some way that note concerned her. Somehow he looked sorry for her. What was it ? Could anything have happened to Paul ?

Presently M. de Montmirail came back again, and this time he really did look very solemn, so that the old Vicomtesse, and

M. de Cernay, and Antoinette all exclaimed together.

Celia's blue eyes deepened as she looked at him, and she turned a little pale. He went up to Mrs. Percival, who started with surprise ; it had not occurred to her that the note concerned any one but himself.

‘Madame,’ he said, ‘I am truly sorry to spoil such a pleasant evening, but I have just seen my friend—your friend, Mr. Romaine. It appears that he has brought you some news. I begged him to come in, *ma mère*,’ said the Marquis, turning to Madame de Ferrand, ‘but he has not long arrived from England, and his only wish is to see these ladies. He tells me, too, that he must go back to-morrow morning ; therefore——’

Mrs. Percival started up hurriedly.

‘Dear madame,’ said Madame de Ferrand,

with the kindest politeness, ‘do not delay a moment. We shall see you again. I only hope the news is nothing serious.’

Celia followed her aunt out of the room in a sort of dream. What could have brought Paul now, so soon—before he could possibly have received her letter! With all her high spirit, all her confidence in herself, and in Paul’s love, she dreaded the explanation of that evening. Then a cloak was put gently round her shoulders, and she looked up for a moment, in the dim light of the vestibule, into a face she could never afterwards forget: it was so full of admiration, of tenderness, and more than that. Celia knew that she had made a conquest, but it seemed a useless one: the adoration of the most perfect of heroes would be no help to her in her present scrape. In another moment, the Marquis was attending on her

aunt, with the gravest politeness ; he now looked rather pale and stern ; perhaps he was angry at having forgotten himself for an instant. The dear little Antoinette came up close to Celia, took her hand and kissed it softly.

‘ Oh, don’t ! ’ Celia whispered, and with a quick caress she kissed the girl on both cheeks.

‘ Are you sad ? ’ murmured Antoinette. ‘ Are you afraid that *ce monsieur* has brought bad news of the old friend ? Are you very fond of him, too ? ’

‘ Yes—oh yes ; perhaps he has,’ Celia answered confusedly. ‘ My aunt is very anxious.’

‘ Shall we see you to-morrow ? ’

‘ I don’t know. I hope so ; ’ and Celia followed her aunt, who had gone out into the courtyard with M. de Montmirail ; they were looking back for her.

In the few moments of crossing the street to the hotel, Celia was conscious of an intense irritation against herself, against Paul, against Vincent, her aunt, the whole world, not forgetting those people who were tiresome enough to be ill and die.

She hated long faces ; and she felt sure that Colonel Ward was dead. All this had come upon her too suddenly, and she was not at all prepared to carry out the tactics she had begun in her useless letter to Paul the night before. She was angry, and felt a little reckless and desperate.

When Paul, very quiet and very undemonstrative, met them outside the Deux Frères, and M. de Montmirail bowed and went back to his house, Celia caught herself wishing that she could go back with him. As they walked into the hotel she heard Paul telling her aunt about the Colonel ; she heard the

quick sob in her aunt's voice : ' Oh, poor dear ! ' and she herself felt perfectly unmoved.

Paul did not speak to her. They had all gone up into a little anteroom belonging to Mrs. Percival's room, a narrow slip, piled with boxes and parcels, and there Mrs. Percival sat down and listened, and cried now and then, for she was a soft-hearted woman. She was too much absorbed to notice anything strange or unnatural in Paul's manner. Of course his grief was very deep, and yet, if she had thought, what depth of grief could make a division between him and Celia, so that he could stand in a room where she was sitting, and talk quietly on with his eyes on the floor, without even once looking at her ! Mrs. Percival did not notice it, but Celia did, and in spite of herself, she shivered as she sat there ; for

the first time in her life she was afraid of Paul.

‘But, my dear boy,’ said Mrs. Percival at last, ‘what quantities of things you must have to do! Why did you come over? Really it was rather absurd. Why in the world didn’t you write or telegraph?’

‘Because I had something to do here,’ Paul answered. ‘I am going back to-morrow. I want to talk to Celia about something. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind leaving us alone together. Shall it be now?’ he said, turning for the first time to Celia.

‘Now—certainly, if you like,’ she answered, in a tone as cold as his own.

‘Why—what is the matter?’ exclaimed Mrs. Percival, suddenly waking up to the situation, and looking in amazement from one to the other.

‘Nothing,’ said Celia, ‘except that Paul is angry with me.’

She leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. She was looking down, and flushed crimson. Paul turned a little whiter than before.

‘But what is it? Good gracious! When did it happen? What has she done, Paul?’ cried Mrs. Percival.

‘He can’t tell you,’ said Celia in a low tone, as Paul made no answer. ‘Go away, dear Aunt Flo, and leave us to fight it out. You would have thought there was trouble enough without this, wouldn’t you?’

‘I certainly am surprised that you should both choose such a time for quarrelling,’ said Mrs. Percival.

She stood still for a moment, looking anxiously, with tearful eyes, at the two incomprehensible young people, who were both

staring obstinately at the ground. Then she sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and went away into her own room with a few parting words.

‘ I must say, if you persist in quarrelling now, you will be very unfeeling and very idiotic.’





CHAPTER XX.

‘A GREY DISCOURAGED SKY OVERHEAD, THE
SHORT LAST DAYLIGHT OF DECEMBER.’

‘VERY unfeeling and very idiotic! Poor Aunt Flo! Which of us is which, I wonder?’ said Celia, and she laughed.

There had been a few moments of painful silence, which she bore till she could bear it no longer. There they were alone together, Paul and she, in the smart little desolate room which had been so often given up to them lately, and where Paul, at least, had spent so many happy quarters of an hour.

Many of M. Dupont's rooms were furnished with spoils of old houses in the Faubourg ; white and gold chairs, with lovely brocaded cushions ; mirrors, clocks, candlesticks, in the most elegant rococo style. Mrs. Percival's rooms were among the prettiest in the hotel. Celia at this moment was leaning back in an arm-chair, whose curves and colouring would have delighted a connoisseur, and white and gold Cupids danced up the frame of the mirror in which Paul's head was reflected, as he stood before the fireplace. The proceeds of a long day's shopping were piled on the floor ; there was no fire, and the room was cold ; Celia wrapped her cloak more closely round her, and tapped impatiently with her foot upon the ground.

' Well, Paul ? ' she said, as he stood unmoved before her.

‘Suppose we say that you are unfeeling, and I am idiotic,’ he answered quietly.

His whole tone and manner had altered so completely, he had so utterly ceased to be himself, that Celia wrinkled her brows and gazed at him in astonishment. This was not her adoring young lover, this was not the affectionate, generous, trusting boy who had written her that last letter full of wonder and perplexity. He had been puzzled by that mysterious letter of hers ; but it had not interfered with his love, hardly with his confidence. What had happened since to make this change ?

Instinct told Celia that for some strange reason she had lost her power, and yet she could hardly believe it, and at that moment all her thoughts and wishes were bent on having it back again. Not that she loved Paul, but she liked him to love her ; she

was very unwilling to lose his romantic worship, and the promise of a life of wealth, indulgence, and liberty. But what was she to do with a young man who would not even look at her, standing there like a stone !

‘ I don’t think I am unfeeling,’ she said. ‘ I wrote to you last night ; but of course, tearing off like this, you did not get the letter.’

‘ What did you say ?’

‘ I asked you to come back. If I had known what you would be like, when you did come—I think I might have asked you to stay in England. Certainly I should not have said all I did say.’

‘ Will you answer me one question, Celia ?’ he said ; and then he lifted his head and looked at her, with such wistful, sleepless melancholy in his eyes, that almost any

woman would have been touched by it. Celia was, in her way ; she saw that she had brought this shadow on Paul, and believed that she could clear it away—if she only knew all that was in his mind. An unworthy suspicion flashed across her brain ; perhaps he had shown that letter to the Colonel before he died, or to some other odious person who had taken the worst view of it.

She pointed to the chair beside her.

‘Come and sit here,’ she said. ‘I will answer any questions you like.’

‘Thanks ; I’d rather stand,’ said Paul. ‘That letter you sent me—it was written to somebody else, wasn’t it ? Not meant for me at all ?’

‘Who put that into your head ?’ said Celia ; and in spite of herself her eyes fell, and she blushed crimson again.

‘Nobody ; I thought of it myself,’ said Paul. ‘There was no name, and I naturally read the letter several times, trying to find out the meaning of it. Then that occurred to me—which of course makes all clear.’ Under the circumstances, you will forgive me for reading the letter. Here it is. I have brought it back to you.’

He came across the room, laid the letter on her lap, and went back to his place on the hearth-rug. She instantly tore the letter into several pieces and threw them on the ground.

Then Paul was really cruel. He said :

‘I thought you would not send it now. You can write a different one.’

‘I never meant to send it at all,’ she said, in a half-choked voice. ‘Of course it was a most awful mistake sending it to you; but I was in a great hurry——’

‘As you wrote it, the best thing you could do was to send it to me,’ said Paul. ‘Seeing may be painful, but one would rather not be kept blind.’

‘But let me explain——’

‘I really don’t want any more explanation,’ he said. ‘Don’t you think, yourself, that we understand each other well enough now? I did not hope for any explanation; it was all too clear. I only came to say good-bye.’

Celia sat perfectly still, looking down at her torn letter. Paul turned half away, resting his arm on the chimney-piece; but this was only for a minute. He suddenly straightened himself up, drew a long breath, looked at her with the same pain in his eyes, and said in a low voice :

‘Well, good-bye!’

Then Celia made a great effort. For the

sake of bringing him back, she conquered her pride, her anger, and other feelings too. She got up, came quickly to him where he stood, laid her hand in his and her head against his shoulder.

‘Not good-bye to me, Paul?’ she said.

He looked down for an instant into her lovely face; and then rather wildly away from her. He did not even let his fingers close on hers, but said very low, between his teeth:

‘How can you—when you know—that I know! And it has been always like this!’

Celia stepped back from him to a little sofa close by, and sat down there, clasping her hands, and looking up at him imploringly.

‘Oh, Paul,’ she whispered, ‘I was so poor; and you were so good to me. It was the first and last and only letter—I

said that, didn't I? I had to write to him, don't you see, because he wanted me to break off my engagement. I never meant to do that.'

'No,' said Paul. 'You said you were not brave enough.'

'I couldn't help it. I wish I had never seen him. Indeed, I never flirted with him, or brought it on myself in any way. The only wrong thing I have done was to scribble that letter; and I did not mean to send it. I meant to write another, quite a cold one, that you, or anybody in the world, might have read. I really was angry with him for writing to me, when he might have known it was of no use. Paul, forget that nonsensical letter. I did not mean half I said in it. Paul, I want you to forgive me. Why have you changed in this dreadful way? But of course it must be as you please.'

The tears were running down Celia's face, but Paul would not look at her.

'I suppose it is Vincent Percival?' he said ; and then he threw himself into a low chair, and hid his face in his arms on the end of the sofa.

'Yes,' said Celia more steadily. 'He was foolish enough to fall in love with me last summer ; but he did not know I was engaged. Aunt Flo and I never mean to have a secret again. It was very tiresome—just the last day—when you were there, too. If you had not been so good, and generous, and angelic, I don't know what I should have done—at least, there might have been some sort of row, for I never dreamed, Paul—I never dreamed of throwing you over for him. Still, it is too true that you have never really understood me. Haven't I told you so ? haven't I told you

that some day you would find me out, and think me a fiend ?’

‘ I don’t think you a fiend,’ said Paul. ‘ But I see that you never have cared for me, and never will. If we marry we shall be two unhappy people. And there are circumstances—you will know some day—which make me feel justified in telling you so.’

‘ But, Paul,’ she said, ‘ I don’t think we should be unhappy. I will be very good, and I do like you to care for me, you know. If this horrid accident had not come to part us, you would never have thought of it.’

‘ No, because I believed — however, I know I am doing what is right for us both,’ he said.

‘ Very well ; as you please ; I can say no more,’ said Celia. ‘ You can’t bear the truth, and you can’t forgive ; as for me, I

can't go on excusing myself for ever. Good-bye, then.'

She made a little movement, but did not actually get up from the sofa. Looking at the dark bent head so near her, the strange creature almost felt as if she really cared for Paul. She lifted her hand, as if she meant to touch his hair, but quickly dropped it again, for he looked up and began to speak.

'I will not marry a woman who only cares for my money. You have said so plainly, though you meant to deceive me to the end. Perhaps it was not your fault. As for Vincent—he is a villain.'

'Look here,' she said, 'speak against me as much as you like, but don't tell anyone about him. Remember that is my secret, and you only found it out by accident. I can trust you, can't I?'

‘I am not likely to talk about you or him,’ said Paul. ‘This is no one’s business except yours and mine.’

‘I’m afraid——’ said Celia, hesitating. ‘I think—don’t you—Aunt Flo and Uncle Tom will want to know the meaning of it.’

‘Well, you can’t tell them the truth, of course,’ said Paul, rather bitterly. ‘Say what you please. Say that I am too stupid for you, and that you can’t stand me any longer.’

‘If I can’t tell the truth I need not invent fresh lies,’ said Celia, and she laughed. ‘Besides, it would be no use, for they wouldn’t believe me. Aunt Flo knows me too well; she won’t give me credit for all that romantic impatience. They will be in an awful state, of course; and they will think you a very changeable

person. I really don't know what Uncle Tom will say.'

Paul lifted his head. He was very pale and frowning. It had not occurred to him before that Canon and Mrs. Percival would think his behaviour dishonourable ; and of course it was utterly impossible for him to justify himself by betraying Celia. He began to see that, after all, the matter was in her hands more than in his own. His brain, half confused by grief and sleeplessness, began to wake to the fact that he was putting himself and Celia in an extremely awkward position. And Celia, meanwhile, sat looking across the room at those boxes and parcels piled against the wall. Paul was obliged to remember, as his eyes followed hers, that marriage, after all, involves a good deal besides sentiment, or even passion.

At the same time, he knew that he could tell Celia something which would probably change her views and reduce his own importance immensely. He understood her well enough now ; how could he help it ? She had bared her soul, poor thing, in that letter, every word of which seemed to burn before his eyes. Riches, comfort, indulgence—these were all the things she cared for in life ; for these she meant to marry him ; she would not have given up these for Vincent, the only man, it seemed, who had ever touched her heart at all. Paul knew very well that if he could say to her, ‘ You are rich yourself ; money is nothing to you. Colonel Ward has left you seventy thousand pounds,’ he would gain his freedom without any further argument. But he could not say it ; he could not stand there and watch Celia, the woman he had so

loved and honoured, while she degraded herself still further in his eyes.

It may be said that Paul was absurdly high-flown, refined, and idealistic ; but we must remember that he was a 'muff,' a rather peculiar, old-fashioned young man knowing little of the world and of women, brought up chiefly in a solitary place, shy, and not easily making friends of his own age, very much guided by the tastes and opinions of the one dear old friend who had now left him. We are quite ready to acknowledge that there are not many characters like Paul ; neither are there many people who can understand him when they meet him.

He left his chair—somehow it was too near Celia—and went back and stood on the hearthrug, looking down at the floor. She turned her head towards him, and

watched him with shining eyes ; she was trying very hard, still, to think of some means that would bring him back to her. She half despised herself, too, being conscious that a girl with any real pride would not have borne so many repulses, but would have left him long ago. ‘ Oh, bother pride ! ’ thought Celia to herself. ‘ I can’t afford any nonsense of that sort. Three more years, at least, to hang about at Woolsborough, depending on Aunt Flo—and then, if I do go to India, very soon to be something rather like a black slave—no, Paul, I can’t let you leave me to that, I can’t really.’

After a minute or two she followed Paul to the fireplace, standing near him with her hand on the chimney-piece, and looking up into his face.

‘ So it wasn’t me that you loved,’ she said,

in a very low voice—‘only the girl you thought I was?’

‘How could I help it?’ said Paul quickly.

‘Do you suppose that people ever really know each other?’ she went on. ‘There must always be a lot of faults—a lot of hidden ones. You never can read a person’s character like a book. Not often, at least : because, dear Paul, for instance, one might go all over the world without meeting another innocent soul like yours. I wish I was as good as you ; I do indeed. But let me tell you, though you think me worse than other women, we are alike, most of us. You will never, never meet a woman who will love you as unselfishly as you love her.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Celia!’ he said, rather sternly. ‘And—you know I shall never care for anybody again.’

She answered with a dismal little laugh :
‘Then don’t you think you might as well
forgive me?’

The only answer he made to this was to turn round, take her in his arms, and kiss her—a long, last kiss. He felt sure it was that, though she, joyful and astonished, could only think of her triumph. Yes, he would marry her now; all would be forgotten; and she would take care never to lose the love that she had kept with so much difficulty.

‘What fools we were!’ she whispered.
‘Dear, I am so tired of Paris. Let us go
back with you to England to-morrow.’

Paul had flushed crimson.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I ought not——’ And then, as she stood there with her hands on his arm, he went on in a quick, low voice : ‘No, you must stay here for

the present. I must go back ; there is so much to do. But I will write in a few days to Mrs. Percival, and she will show you the letter. Then you shall decide. If you choose, in spite of everything, that our marriage shall go on, it shall. I tell you, I think it had better not, and if you agree with me, no one shall ever blame you. Good-night, and good-bye.'

'But, Paul, what do you mean?'

'I can't explain—I would rather not talk any more now,' he said from the door. 'Yes, there was one thing I wanted to tell you. The Colonel said, not long before his death, you know, that he would like you to have Di.'

'Di?' Celia repeated, staring at him.

'Yes, Di ; his Clumber spaniel, the one that was always with him.'

'Oh ! good gracious ! How very sweet of him ! But I have got one already.'

Mrs. Percival's natural curiosity was not, and never would be, fully satisfied ; but her mind was a good deal relieved when Celia came into her room, flushed and smiling, the outer door having been shut on Paul.

‘ Is it all right ? What was the matter ? ’ Mrs. Percival asked anxiously. ‘ Come and sit down by the fire, Celia ; you must be very cold.’

She was herself sitting comfortably with a screen in her hand, warming her feet, and a bright little fire was blazing up the chimney. She looked very soft, and snug, and pleasant ; she was a most agreeable sight, even now, when her handsome brown eyes were heavy with the tears she had given to her old lover.

Celia came and leaned over the fire, stretching out her hands to it.

‘ I suppose it is all right,’ she said. ‘ My

young man is the very oddest young man—he takes the queerest fancies into his head. He loves mystery, which I hate. I wonder if there is any madness in the family.'

'No, certainly not!' cried Mrs. Percival indignantly. 'But can't you tell me—what is it that Paul has got into his head?'

'No, I can't tell you exactly, Aunt Flo,' said Celia. 'I think I have driven it out again. He rather thinks I am not good enough for him.'

'That I can't believe,' said Mrs. Percival. 'Paul worships and adores you. He has a much higher idea of you than—you deserve, my dear.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Celia, gazing into the fire. 'If he has, it is very nice of him. But if you understand—one would rather be a little less adored, and a little

more trusted. The poor dear thing is desperately morbid — perhaps it is no wonder.’

‘Of course he is unhappy; this is a trying time for him,’ said Mrs. Percival. ‘Well—it is true, Celia—I have thought him a little morbid sometimes. I have told him that he ought to trust you more, that he was too sensitive for his own happiness. You see, you are rather a difficult kind of girl for a young fellow like Paul to understand. In fact,’ she went on, sighing, ‘I don’t think you are really suited to each other, and I have sometimes been afraid that I ought not to have encouraged it. You see, Celia, you don’t care for him quite enough, and when he is a little less blinded by his admiration for you—I don’t know—there may be unhappiness—jealousy, perhaps. However——’

‘Who could Paul be jealous of?’ said Celia sharply.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mrs. Percival more lightly. ‘Of M. de Montmirail, for instance, who admires you so much.’

They both laughed. Neither of them had any wish to go deeper into the subject.

‘Dear M. de Montmirail!’ said Celia. ‘Now if I was a French girl, with heaps of money—what fun it would be to restore that jolly old château that his little girl was telling me about!’

‘They certainly are charming people,’ said Mrs. Percival.

‘Charming! I never saw such people. They make you so perfectly happy and contented with yourself. Sweet creatures! they are never serious and disagreeable. I love them. I wonder if M. le Marquis will ever marry again?’

‘Madame de Ferrand told me something about that,’ said Mrs. Percival. ‘She said he had thought of it ; but gave it up again because the idea made his little daughter so unhappy.’

‘Selfish little goose ! Why, it would be a very good thing for her,’ said Celia.

She had settled herself on a low stool in front of the fire, which was inconsiderately burning her face. Mrs. Percival watched her from behind her screen. She was not quite easy in her mind, and felt that she would be glad when the wedding was safely over, and her responsibility at an end. She felt sure that, in spite of Celia’s light talk, the thoughts that occupied her were rather serious too. Sitting there in the firelight, the girl’s face was more thoughtful and anxious than her aunt had ever seen it before. Not angry, not unreasonable, as

she had been when Paul went away to the Colonel. This was something deeper than that. It was no use asking questions, for Celia would not answer them; but Mrs. Percival felt more and more sure that there was something behind, something she was not intended to know. Well—and she herself knew something that Celia did not know, at least she supposed not; and she did not exactly feel any wish to tell her.

‘Did Paul tell you if the Colonel had left him anything?’ she asked presently, in a low voice.

‘No; but most likely he has—everything, I should think,’ said Celia. ‘Unless he has left it to you, Aunt Flo.’

‘Oh no; not to me.’

‘To Paul, no doubt. But they don’t read people’s wills, do they, till after the

funeral. By-the-bye, he has left me something.'

'What?' said Mrs. Percival.

Her heart gave a sudden jump, and she looked hard at Celia, who answered indifferently enough.

'Oh, well, poor dear, Paul says I am to have that old dog he was so fond of;' and Mrs. Percival said nothing.

After some time she sighed, and laid down her screen.

'I must have a talk with Paul,' she said. 'I want to know a great many things.'

'Not to-night; he's tired to death,' said Celia.

'To-morrow morning, then. Tell me, Celia, did you really part friends?'

'Oh, the best of friends. Good-night, Aunt Flo.'

When Mrs. Percival sent to Paul in the

morning, he had already started for England. She was at first doubtful whether she and Celia had not better follow him ; but Celia objected to this so decidedly that she resigned herself, and waited.

Colonel Ward was laid under the snow in the high churchyard of Holm, where the starlings cried over his head, and the old bells rang in the wooden steeple. All around were the glory and shadow of the hills, and nearer, lower down, the solemn depth of the pine-wood. He was followed to his grave by a few old friends and acquaintances ; Paul Romaine, the doctor, Mr. Cole, Mr. Bailey the agent, one or two old brother officers and neighbours who honoured him, though they did not know him very well. The snow was too deep for Canon Percival to come from Woolsborough ; but he wrote Paul a

very generous and sympathizing letter. The service was read by the Vicar of Holm, a good, rather puzzled young man, to whom Colonel Ward, in his solitary life, had always been a subject of some anxiety. Di came with Paul, and laid herself down by the grave ; afterwards she would not leave it, till Paul actually carried her away.

Dr. Graves, who had been both hurt and cynically amused by Paul's hurried journey to Paris the day after his old friend's death, now found that the young man must be restored to his old place in his esteem. Nothing could be better, more business-like, more proper in every way, according to the doctor's ideas, than young Romaine's behaviour before, at, and after the funeral. He was quite calm, and quite clear-headed. Mr. Cole, the lawyer, found him a most satisfactory executor ; his only fault, perhaps,

was an absolute absence of any show of feeling ; he took it rather too much as a matter of course that Colonel Ward's unexpectedly large fortune should be almost all divided between himself and the girl he was going to marry. The only thing which seemed to give him a faint touch of pleasure was the Colonel's wish that Mrs. Percival should have his old china and other ornaments ; also his diamonds, 'except those now in her hands, of which she already knows the destination.' Paul did not know what this meant ; but in the dark sad evening of that day, in the study at his own old house, from which he had turned out the workmen for the present, he sat down and wrote a formal business letter to Mrs. Percival, telling her, and begging her to tell Celia, all the particulars of the Colonel's will.

When he had finished that letter he wrote a few lines to Celia, and told her she would now see how entirely the future was in her own hands. 'If it is to be good-bye,' he said, 'I think I shall go abroad at once, for a long time; in the other case, you will do as you please. Do not keep me very long in suspense.'

Who can say what he wished in his heart? The hardest thing in the whole world is to remember the unworthiness of our dearest.

Anyhow, here ends the story of Paul Romaine's first love.

END OF PART I.



PART II.





CHAPTER I.

THE HERO'S RETURN.

IN the old city of Woolsborough, there was nothing to mark the lapse of more than four years. Day by day, Dr. Chanter's organ and the Cathedral choir sent up their music to the lofty stone roof, possibly higher still. Week by week, crowds came on Sunday evening to listen to their favourite preachers, as Paul and Celia did once, and perhaps some of them altered their lives a little in consequence. Sometimes, at sunset, the great west window was illumined, as Paul had seen it when he came back from that walk

of his. Down in the back streets leading to the river, which flowed on under its bridges as usual, men and women lounged about and sat on their begrimed doorsteps, and would as soon have thought of climbing up into heaven on a rainbow, as of going up the hill and across the Close to the great church whose bells shook the air all round them, and where their forerunners certainly worshipped four hundred years ago.

Canon and Mrs. Percival still lived at River Gate. They spent most of the year there now, having given up their little house at Holm. The Canon was beginning to be a little restless, and secretly to think himself overlooked by Bishops and Government ; but in appearance he was unchanged. Mrs. Percival had gone through a good deal of worry, and there were a few more lines in her face ; but she had found peace and

comfort in doing up her drawing-room, which now was really beautiful ; in it, Colonel Ward's old china and French enamels had at last found a sphere where they could shine.

And now Vincent had come home from India, and his mother had welcomed him with real, heartfelt joy. On a lovely April afternoon, while the sun was shining peacefully over the terraces bright with spring flowers, and the Cathedral bells in a soft dreamy cadence were chiming for service, she was strolling up and down with her hand in Vincent's arm, and they were talking of things that had happened since he went away. Vincent, who had arrived the night before, was really glad to see his mother again ; his father did not interest him. He was pleased at the loving welcome she gave him ; he had been roughing it a good deal of

late years, had been through a small war with some frontier tribes, where he was slightly wounded, and could now, with her at least, be a hero to his heart's content. He was a thin, yellow, sunburnt, fierce-looking man ; he looked, in fact, even more positively ill-tempered than when he went out, four years and a half ago ; but in this case, perhaps, appearances were deceitful ; his mother had not heard him say a cross word yet, and thought he had come home charming.

Of course they soon began to talk of Celia, a rather painfully interesting subject to them both.

‘She certainly was the making of the place, that summer,’ Vincent said, as his eyes wandered over the garden where Celia used to walk. ‘How confoundedly pretty she was, the little witch ! I couldn’t get her out

of my head for a long time. Is she as pretty now ?'

'I suppose so,' said Mrs. Percival. 'I believe she is very well, and happy, and all that. You know I have only seen her once since her marriage, and that was in Paris, two years ago. She has asked us to go down and see them, but I really didn't much care about it, and your father quite disliked the idea. He was so shocked at her turning Roman Catholic.'

'Well, the best thing she could do, as she married one,' said Vincent. 'I suppose he and his people insisted on it.'

'Not exactly, but it smoothed over difficulties. Last year there was some talk of their coming to stay with the Lefroys, which would have been very awkward for us. I was glad it was given up.'

'Nonsense ! Who would think it awk-

ward? Nobody but my father. I wish they would come this year. I should like to see Celia again.'

'I don't care very much to see her,' said Mrs. Percival sadly.

'Why, my dear old woman, she has done you no harm. As for her breaking off with that ass Romaine, it was quite right; she never could have cared for him. Besides, I understood you to say that they quarrelled, and it was as much his doing as hers.'

'I never could quite make out the history of that affair,' said Mrs. Percival. 'Paul was devoted to her. I feel convinced she must have done something that cut him up terribly, though she never would allow it to me. Something was wrong, just at the time of dear old Colonel Ward's death. But Celia would never have broken off with Paul

if that money had not been left her. That, of course, made everything easy. She was ready to find out, then, that she and Paul could never get on together.'

'I say she was right.'

'She was heartless and ungrateful, Vincent. Well, I soon began to see what would happen. She had taken a violent fancy to these French people; and as soon as she knew of her fortune, and had broken off her engagement, which she did instantly, she absolutely threw herself into their arms. Nothing was ever settled in such a frightful hurry. I think even M. de Montmirail was almost ashamed, having only made our acquaintance through poor Paul, but he was desperately in love with Celia; so was his daughter, and so was his mother-in-law, Madame de Ferrand. She came to talk to me about it. Of course, Celia was perfectly independent. I could

not influence her one way or the other, and she made up her mind at once. She declared,' said Mrs. Percival, laughing a little, 'that she was in love for the first time in her life. I did not quite believe her; I think it was partly pique, and partly excitement, and the fun of doing anything so unusual. M. de Montmirail was very good-looking, too, and just as much her slave as Paul, only in a more amusing sort of way. Celia and I had laughed about his admiration for her before I ever dreamed of her marrying him. I knew about the money, though, before she did. Colonel Ward told me as a secret; she was to know on her wedding-day.'

'I wonder the Colonel left it to her absolutely,' said Vincent. 'I wonder he didn't make her marrying Paul Romaine a condition; that was weak, Paul being such a

favourite of his. He never meant to send his money to France, poor old chap.'

'Ah! that was Paul's doing,' said Mrs. Percival.

'How do you mean?'

'Dr. Graves, the Colonel's doctor, you know, told your father something about it when he was last at Holm. I think the lawyer who made the will had told him, when everybody was so surprised at Paul's engagement being broken off suddenly, and all the preparations stopped, poor boy! It seems that the Colonel told Paul what he was going to do, and asked him whether the legacy to Celia should be conditional. And he said "certainly not." If he had said "yes," no doubt everything would have come to him. The lawyer and Dr. Graves were both sure that that was the Colonel's intention.'

‘Of course, Romaine never imagined a slip was possible,’ said Vincent. ‘Just the sort of fellow to go blundering on with his eyes shut.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mrs. Percival. ‘There was a shadow, even then. There was something wrong; he was not happy about Celia. Directly after the Colonel died he rushed over to Paris, and they had rather a scene, I know, though Celia made light of it to me. In that affair of the will, I believe Paul behaved very generously.’

‘Behaved like a muff, I should say,’ said Vincent. ‘And what became of him? Where is the poor forsaken youth now?’

‘I really don’t know. He went off to America as soon as he could, and I think he has been all over the world. I have never seen him since. As for Holm and the old house, it really is too sad and deso-

late now. It was all left unfinished, and has been standing empty ever since. The old servants look after it, and the agent sees to the estate, and the woods, and so on. Colonel Ward's dogs live there ; his cottage is never even let in the summer ; sometimes ours is. I wish Paul would write to me sometimes, for certainly the crash was no fault of mine. I was very sorry. I always liked him so much.'

'I wonder what it was that they quarrelled about,' said Vincent, after a minute or two. 'I wonder if it can have been about a letter of mine to Celia, to which she sent me a very cold answer, the day after Colonel Ward died. In that letter there were certainly no signs of her breaking off with Romaine. Therefore I was startled when I heard of all the changes so soon after.'

‘What was your letter about?’ said Mrs. Percival. ‘I heard nothing of it, I think.’

‘Not likely that you would. I suggested to Celia that she might as well throw him over before it was too late, and marry me. I deceived myself into an idea that she liked me. But that niece of yours is a desperate flirt.’

‘I think she is. But that was very wrong of you, Vincent. However, I don’t see how Paul could possibly have known of that; she would never have told him.’

‘No; I don’t suppose she would,’ said Captain Percival, taking no notice of his mother’s gentle blame.

‘I often thought of your fancy for Celia, which vexed me so much at the time,’ she went on. ‘When I heard that she was to have all that money, my first thought was

of you—how it might have taken away all difficulties.’

‘Yes, it was hardly fair that a Frenchman should have carried off my luck,’ said Vincent. ‘But I suppose she liked him best. Queer girl! Well, she broke Romaine’s heart, perhaps, but not mine. I have lived very comfortably without her.’

‘Everything is for the best, I dare say,’ said Mrs. Percival peacefully. ‘When Celia lived with me, in spite of her pretty face and pleasant ways, I never was quite sure about her. She was selfish, like her poor father; she had very little real feeling. She liked to be liked; but beyond that, I don’t think she cared much about making other people happy. Well, my dear, we have talked about her enough. Now let me hear something about yourself.’

This was a subject on which Vincent

was always ready to enlarge. He had a fine stock of grievances, which were generally sent home by post ; but they naturally wanted talking over. To-day, however, he was less self-occupied than usual, and the subject of Celia seemed to linger in his mind. After some time, when his mother suggested going in to tea, he delayed her to ask a few more questions.

‘ You hear from the young woman sometimes, I suppose ? What sort of life does she lead ? Is she in Paris a good deal ? ’

‘ Only for a few weeks in the year. At first they were there very often, when Madame de Ferrand was alive, and they went to stay with her. But she died two years ago ; and now they live chiefly down at the old château in the country, where they have plenty of neighbours, and have been very busy restoring the house—with

Celia's money. M. de Montmirail is very fond of the place, and very popular there ; he manages a lot of public business. His daughter is growing up ; she must be seventeen or eighteen now.'

' Does Celia find her a bore ?'

' No, I think not ; she always speaks of her kindly. The girl is very fond of her, I believe.'

' I should rather like to see that *ménage*. Madame la Marquise ! What a joke !' said Vincent, as he followed his mother in at the drawing-room window.





CHAPTER II.

MADAME DE MONTMIRAIL.

IT was a bright May morning in France ; one of those days which the people there call *jours de cristal*, so clear and transparent is the air. The world lay in brilliant sunshine and black shadow ; the trees were motionless, only now and then a gentle breath brought wafts of scent from the acacia and pink may. All shades of tender green, and brown, and gold, were painted as the pre-Raphaelites saw them, on a clear hard background of blue, dazzling sky. Old Pierre was already going round to shut the

shutters, and to let down the sun-blinds outside the salon windows, for Madame la Marquise could not endure rooms flooded with light. M. le Marquis, who was of a different opinion, and sometimes threatened—though he never carried out his threat—to pull shutters open and blinds up in the full glare of mid-day, had just driven off in his dogcart to the station, so that Pierre could work his will unrestrained. Pierre was not particularly fond of his English mistress, who, finding herself absolute ruler, had not thought much about being popular with the old servants. In fact, she had imported a household of new ones, only keeping Pierre and Suzanne because it seemed impossible to send them away, and Suzanne was useful in looking after Antoinette. Pierre's ferocious honesty and loyalty were also good in their way. There might have

been two parties in the house, mademoiselle having her passionate partisans both there and in the village, headed by Pierre and Suzanne. But mademoiselle herself was far too loyal and gentle for any complication of this sort. She had walked down to the avenue to look after her father as he drove away, and was coming slowly back across the broad, white, sunlit court, an old Clumber spaniel walking gravely beside her, and a little black-and-tan terrier, Rataplan, running here and there.

Antoinette had grown a good deal since she was fourteen, but she was by no means tall, and she did not hold herself very well; perhaps French girls seldom do. She had very little colour, but the soft cream tint of her complexion was not unhealthy; her features, of course, had all their young delicate beauty; though her

face was grave in repose, her large dark eyes were full of smiles and sweetness. Her hair was black and thick and curly as ever, though it no longer fell in a mane upon her shoulders. People who had known her mother, the Marquise, who had died so young, were startled by the likeness. Still Antoinette, at eighteen, hardly looked grown up. She tied her hair together with a red or blue ribbon; practised her music two hours a day; wrote translations; and went about all the morning in a large holland pinafore. She fed her chickens, worked in her own little garden, went to Mass with Suzanne at six o'clock every morning, played games with the dogs; and now and then, though very seldom, went out walking, or driving, or riding with her father. She had had a governess for a year or two after she left the convent, chosen by her grand-

mother ; but in this case Madame de Ferrand's arrangements had not been quite so happy as usual. The good woman worried Antoinette, and bored the Marquise ; she was sent away. Then Madame de Ferrand died, and Antoinette was quite left in the hands of her stepmother, who kissed her, and laughed, and told her she was much too clever and pretty to want any more education. Achille did not interfere ; he never differed seriously with his wife ; and so the girl was left to her own devices. Nobody cared ; certainly not Antoinette, who accepted the situation, as it concerned only herself, with light-hearted indifference, and went on working at her lessons, steadily and alone. Suzanne was too happy that her little mademoiselle should be restored to her. In truth, the only people who made any remarks on the subject were Monsieur

and Madame de Cernay ; though they had themselves planned a second marriage for Achille, they were never reconciled to his marrying an Englishwoman, and were ready to think the little Antoinette a much ill-used girl. They were an exception in the neighbourhood, which generally received the new Marquise with great kindness, and was never tired of admiring her beauty, and her good taste in dress and furniture. Achille, with all his good-nature, was a sensitive man ; he knew well enough what the Cernays thought of him, and as a matter of fact, the old intimate friendship between Saint-Bernard and La Tour Blanche had ceased for ever.

As Mdlle. de Montmirail crossed the court, she was met and stopped by an old peasant-woman coming back from the kitchen door. The old hard face was pinched with time and poverty ; the cap was no longer

white ; the short jacket and petticoat were in rags ; the feet were stuck bare into sabots ; but a kindly smile and a quick torrent of jokes and compliments were ready for 'Mdlle. le Marquis.' She must peep into the basket, and see what a fine store of scraps the cook had put into it ; and then she must listen to a long story of the son who had come home from the army, and all his joy at seeing his old mother again.

This went on till the breakfast-bell of the château clanged out over their heads, making it plain that mademoiselle must go in, so Mère Clopin trotted off with her smiling face and her rags and her basket, and Antoinette walked on. But quick steps came trotting up behind her, and she turned round to meet the postman, a soldierly-looking old fellow, with a long moustache and a faded sort of uniform, who took off

his cap with a great flourish, and begged to hand mademoiselle the letters for the family.

With all these hindrances, Antoinette arrived at last in the dining-room to find her stepmother waiting for her, and the soup getting cold.

‘Come, *petite*,’ said the Marquise, from the depths of her large chair, ‘must you be late because your father is not here?’

‘*Pardon, maman*,’ said Antoinette. ‘I went down to the avenue to see the last of him, and then I stopped to talk to Mère Clopin, and then the *facteur* overtook me—and here are your letters.’

‘That Mère Clopin of yours is an unconscionable old beggar,’ said Madame de Montmirail, in English.

She took the letters in her pretty white hands, laid aside those belonging to her

husband, and slowly looked over her own. She had a habit of talking English to Antoinette ; besides that French was not by any means entirely easy to her, it seemed like carrying on the girl's education, and thus made her conscience comfortable. When M. de Montmirail was there, however, they generally talked French ; and English, especially at meals, was a tremendous offence to old Pierre, who considered it supremely bad manners towards himself and the smart young man who helped him.

There was a sort of cloud that morning on Celia's face, generally bright and good-humoured enough. The cloud deepened as she looked over her letters, took out one from among them, and actually frowned over it. But she did not open it till she had finished her soup—cold soup being a thing she detested.

Some people thought that Celia had improved in looks since her marriage, and no one could deny that she was an exceedingly handsome woman. The clear look, the look of youth and innocence, and frank love of fun, which in spite of all her faults used to shine in her blue eyes, had darkened, hardened into something different, though the eyes were expressive enough still. The slight young figure was gone too ; she had grown into a large and rather lazy-looking woman, and being English, unlike Madame de Cernay, had lost a good deal of life and brilliancy in the change. But still she was good-natured and kind, and ready to enjoy everything pleasant that came in her way. Perhaps she was a little disappointed in life, on the whole, and had found it rather less easy than she expected to throw herself into all her new surroundings ; perhaps her Achille was

a little too much devoted, and bored her slightly sometimes with the overwhelming crowd of his attentions ; still, she would not have liked any change in Achille, and she did not tell anyone what she felt in her heart—that these people were too good for her.

As to Achille, he had quite forgotten his first impression of Celia—‘There is something of the devil in that woman.’ To him his wife was perfection ; in the whole world there was no one so charming. He would have liked to tell M. de Cernay a great deal about her ; in fact, the impossibility of this was the only trouble he had.

When the Marquise had finished her soup, she took up the letter and opened it, and read it deliberately. A slow flush stole over her delicate skin, and her lips trembled with the slightest of smiles.

The letter was evidently rather interest-

ing, though practically not more so than the excellent breakfast, of which dish followed dish with great rapidity.

‘Let me see, what is to-day? Wednesday?’ said the Marquise. ‘And your father will not be at home till Saturday.’

‘Perhaps not till Sunday,’ said Antoinette. ‘Unless you send for him, and then he will come home directly. I wish you would, *maman*! Five days; it is perfectly enormous!’

‘Quite out of the question! Five days!’ repeated Celia. ‘But I can’t send for him unless you choose to be ill.’

‘I am never ill. You must be ill yourself,’ said Antoinette, laughing.

‘It is no use; we are all as strong as Hercules. Anyhow, I can tell him he must come home on Saturday, because—and yet why should it matter?’

She asked this question of herself, seemingly ; then her eyes fell on the letter again ; then she stared out of the window, playing an impatient tune with her fingers on the polished table. Then she drank her coffee, and then met the gaze of Antoinette's rather puzzled dark eyes.

'Ah, you don't know what I am talking about?' she said. '*Tiens!* Do you know this writing?' and she held up an envelope with the Paris post-mark.

'No,' said Antoinette. 'I never saw it before, but it is the writing of an Englishman. Papa's cousin, Sir John Lefroy, writes a little like that ; but this is not from him.'

'Fee, fo, fum!' and Celia began to laugh. 'So you can find out an Englishman. Don't look so amazed, *ma belle*. Come into the salon, and I'll tell you all about it.'

In the salon the sun-blinds were down, but long rays of light fell across the shining floor. It was a very different room from what it used to be, shabby, dingy, and damp-stained. The ceiling and chimney-piece were gorgeously painted, the walls were hung with fine old tapestry, and the rows of stately high-backed chairs relaxed so far as to admit a few very comfortable ones, for the repose of modern bones. In the corners and the windows, great broad-leaved plants threw shadows. There was a good deal of rich colour, all subdued in tone. Everyone who saw the restored salon agreed that Madame de Montmirail had made a distinguished success. Even Madame de Cernay was obliged to admire it, though she could not help saying that its one want was the want of original ideas. But this was absurd, after all, for with the

‘style Louis Treize’ to guide you, what do you want with originality?

Celia sat down in one of the comfortable chairs, between two long lines of sunlight, and laid her letters on a table close by, except that interesting one, which she kept in her hand.

Antoinette, in her large pinafore, arranged herself on a *pouf* not far off, her dark head bent forward to listen; she looked like a little image of polite attention.

‘First I must tell you who this letter is from,’ said her stepmother. ‘It is from a certain creature named Vincent Percival.’

‘A relation of Madame Percival?’ said Antoinette.

‘Not far wrong, *petite*. A near relation; her son—her only son—her only child, and therefore a great treasure—besides being my first cousin.’

‘*Mais parfaitement !*’ murmured Antoinette.

‘You are wondering that you never heard of him before? Well, he has been in India half his life—but stop, did not you hear me telling your father, some weeks ago, how he had been in a small fight or two on the frontier, and had been wounded in the shoulder? You were not there? Well, it doesn’t matter; so it was. I have not seen him for nearly five years; before I was married. I knew he had come home; I heard it from my aunt the other day. Now this celebrated hero is in Paris, and writes to ask if he may come down here on Saturday. We used to be friends, you understand. He was kinder to me than some of my relations—when I was a very poor girl, and had no home.’

‘But then you will be delighted to see

him. It is well ; it is very well,' said Antoinette, in her pretty broken English.

' Yes, I should like to see him. Anyhow, I suppose he must come,' said Celia, and then she dropped into silence, and looked gravely at the floor.

Antoinette sat watching her, smiling a little. She had never heard her stepmother speak with much kindness of her English relations, who seemed on the whole to have been a heartless set of people. It was supposed that Mrs. Percival, her aunt, had not been quite pleased at her marriage ; then there was her change of religion, which of course made a barrier, though to Antoinette's mind the Anglican Church was a thing incomprehensible. This cousin evidently rose above the English and Protestant ideas of the family ; and no doubt the very visible effort, the affectation almost,

so unlike her general way of talking, with which Celia spoke of him, was owing to her feeling of partial estrangement from the rest of the family.

‘Papa will be charmed to see your English cousin. He is so fond of the English,’ said Antoinette presently. ‘And I am sure he will come back to receive him, if he can.’

‘If he can’t, do you think it will matter?’ said Celia. ‘If Vincent is obliged to come on Saturday, and he can’t come back till Sunday?’

There was something quite oddly helpless in the way she said this—she whose habit always was to decide everything for herself, and certainly never to consult her young stepdaughter.

‘You know best,’ said Antoinette, the smile deepening in her eyes. ‘Nobody

will think it matters if you don't, *chère belle maman !*

She sprang up from her low seat, crossed the room to Celia, and stopping behind her, leaned over and lightly kissed the thick gold braids of her hair.

‘I must go and feed the chickens,’ she said, and she darted out of the room, leaving the Marquise alone with Vincent Percival’s letter.





CHAPTER III.

THE ENGLISH COUSIN.

THE train from Paris steamed slowly into the station at Saint-Bernard, past the cemetery with its many crosses, under old garden walls, up to the platform, now shaded with laburnum and pink may. The sun was getting low, and one of the may-trees made a natural bower full of rosy light, where three people were talking together, apart from the Saturday crowd of caps and blouses. The sky was cloudless, and the air dazzlingly clear, and fresh without a

touch of coldness. Coming down from the glaring heat and noise of Paris into this pure quiet country was like stepping into Paradise.

Captain Percival, rather cross, and wearied with his long day's journey, was looking out of the window. He thought that after all he was perhaps doing something rather too kind and good-natured, in travelling all this distance to see a person who had certainly treated his family, and especially himself, with great coldness and ingratitude. In fact, it was curiosity that brought him down into these French wilds ; curiosity as to the sort of life that his cousin had made out for herself, mixed with a certain love of interference, and a vast capacity for being bored at Woolsborough, which had made him feel that he must have a few days in Paris by way of relaxation. And once in Paris, it

was natural to think of Celia, and to wonder what change the years had made in her, and in short, generously to offer his friendship to the cold, worldly woman who had declined anything better. As he travelled down from Paris that day, he was at first rather pleased with what he was doing ; but the journey was tiresome ; there was a bustling change into a slow, cross-country train, which bored him ; he hated the French and their ‘administration,’ and was inclined to quarrel with every official he came across ; he began to wonder how he would be received, if that confounded Marquis would give himself airs ; he sneered inwardly at French titles, after the fashion of an ignorant Englishman ; he read Celia’s note again, and thought it cold ; he wondered if she would keep her promise of sending to meet him ; in short,

he prepared himself to be injured, offended, and slighted in every possible way.

In this frame of mind he looked out to see if the little station happened to be Saint-Bernard, and had no need to listen to the voices of the porters, for there he saw his cousin Celia standing under the may-tree, talking to an ugly little man and a handsome woman, herself beautifully dressed, and much handsomer, he instantly thought, than in the days when he made love to her at Woolsborough, now so long ago.

In another moment she saw him, and said a farewell word to her companions, parting from them with bows and smiles. The little man, who had been standing bare-headed talking to her, put his hat on again, and he and the lady hurried towards the train. Madame de Montmirail came straight to the carriage from which Vincent was getting

out, with smiles and out-stretched hands. He certainly could not complain of her welcome.

‘I am so very glad to see you,’ she said, in the voice whose every peculiar tone he remembered so well. ‘It is so kind of you to come.’

Vincent did not exactly know whether he was pleased with her manner, though in theory, of course, it was perfection. It showed plainly that the past was not to be remembered, and therefore that there could not possibly be any awkwardness in their intercourse now. It was very dignified and quite natural. Vincent could only put on his best manners, and answer this stately young Marquise in the way she seemed to expect.

Her large open carriage was waiting outside the station, and the horses were shaking

their bells impatiently. Soon they were off, and then Madame de Montmirail began very amiably to make apologies for her husband.

‘Achille is so sorry,’ she said. ‘He is kept at Tours on business till to-morrow afternoon. He told me to explain to you. Till to-morrow I hope you will be able to endure life with me and Antoinette.’

‘I think so, thank you,’ said Vincent.

‘Not that there will be much to amuse you afterwards, I am afraid,’ she went on. ‘This is such a very bad time of year, you know; all our neighbours are in Paris. You should have come in September, when we are really gay, and when you could have gone out shooting.’

‘Thanks,’ said Vincent; ‘but after all, I came to see you, and French sport is, perhaps—well, an acquired taste!’

‘ Like English society,’ said Celia, laughing a little. ‘ In the country at least, and in cathedral towns. Poor dear old Woolsborough ! How dull it used to be ! And tell me, how is everybody ? When did you leave Aunt Flo and Uncle Tom ? Are they quite well ?’

‘ The Canon is flourishing,’ said Vincent. ‘ Not so sure about my mother ; she looks a little worn. She is four years older, you know, and it shows. Not that that is always the case—at least, the years are kind to some people, and give them what they take away from others.’

‘ Thanks ; that is very pretty. You will do very well in France,’ said Celia, looking at him and smiling.

As she met his rather melancholy eyes, some strong memory of days gone by came suddenly over her ; she became grave and

silent, and looked the other way. They drove on quickly, along the straight road with its border of poplars, now all a soft shimmering green, with lovely grey and blue shadows, standing tall and motionless against the clear depth of evening sky. The intense stillness, the sweetness of the air, with its just perceptible breath of wood-smoke and fir-trees, the sunset glory that was growing deeper, flaming up before it died, in a last attempt to delay the victory of that soft grey twilight which was already lurking in shady places, in deep lanes, in low meadows under trees—all this, the natural magic of a summer evening in Anjou, was now at its height, and could not fail of its effect on people with so much to remember, though they might be among the least romantic of their kind.

Vincent watched his companion with a

sort of wonder. In his heart he had never really understood her proceedings, for he had never really believed in the coldness and hardness of which he had accused her. In spite of everything she chose to say, he had been honestly convinced that she cared for him, when he went away to India. Of course she never cared for Paul Romaine : that he knew, and he was right there. But her cold answer to his mad letter from India had really surprised him, showing that he had very blindly misunderstood Celia ; and after this her giving herself away, fortune and all, to a Frenchman, seemed to show that his cousin Celia, the bright girl who had made Woolsborough so pleasant that summer, had never really existed. Why had she married this Frenchman ? Was it possible that she cared for him ? There were a dozen questions to be asked about it,

but no satisfactory answer could possibly be had. Paying her a visit in her foreign home was the likeliest way of making discoveries, and the first of these seemed to be that she was contented.

‘And why are you not in Paris, like everybody else?’ asked Vincent, suddenly breaking the silence.

‘Well—I don’t know—we are economizing a little,’ she answered. ‘We have spent a great deal on the house, as you will see, and there is plenty more to do still. And my husband is *maire* of our village, and takes an immense interest in all the local politics. He is one of the very few men of his kind whom the people really love, you know. I dare say, as time goes on, he will do a great deal more in politics, in a more public way. All the Legitimists think so very much of him.’

‘And is it all new, his interest in these things? All since you married him?’

‘Before that, things were different, you see,’ answered Celia coolly. ‘He hardly lived here; the place was half in ruins. He lived about anywhere—with his mother-in-law in Paris a good deal.’

‘Who were those people at the station?’

Celia smiled, and hesitated a moment before she answered. The smile came from a little amused wonder, a recognition of old times come back again. This certainly was Vincent, unchanged, abrupt, absolutely ill-mannered as ever.

‘The Baron and Baronne de Cernay,’ she said. ‘They have a fine old château at Saint-Bernard. They are very old friends of Achille’s.’

‘Friends of yours too?’

‘We don’t quite love each other. Oh,

very civil, of course. But they are patriotic, and don't understand Achille's weakness for the English.'

'Isn't it altogether an unfriendly sort of business, living here? You can't be really intimate with anyone.'

'As to that,' said Celia, 'many of the people are charming, and like me very much. Intimate—I don't care about that, you know. I never did—it is not my disposition.'

The sun had set, though the world was still glowing; but in the deep shaded lanes by the little river in the valley, through which they were now driving, it was already twilight. But Celia's fair face seemed to shine clear against the dimness, as she looked at Vincent with smiling eyes.

'You are as mysterious as ever,' he said.

'No, I am not at all mysterious. You

told me my character long ago—and I suppose I am consistent.'

'I don't believe it. I can't make you out,' Vincent muttered, half to himself.

'Don't bother yourself by trying. One thing you must think—that I am very unkind and odious, for I have never said a word about all the fine things you did in India—or asked about your wound. Is it quite well now?'

'Yes, thank you. I left off my sling before I landed in England, six weeks ago. Who told you anything about my doings in India?'

'Aunt Flo's letters were full of them, of course.'

'Well, it's a long history. I can't begin it now. I want to look about at your pretty country. Really, it is a very characteristic sort of country.'

‘ I never saw anything like it before I came here. Do you notice how much yellow broom there is everywhere ? In the wilder bits, and the woods, it is quite lovely—and we have such beautiful hedges, all very tall, and sprawling and trailing, and full of wild roses and honeysuckle. I shall take you out walking, Vincent. Dear me, poor thing, how bored you will be !’

‘ If I am, I shall go back to Paris. It’s true, I haven’t your sublime power of enjoying everything. Hallo ! what’s that ?’

They had reached the top of the hill, and were turning down to the village. Vincent’s exclamation was caused by his first sight of the great white tower of the château, rising there among dark woods, bathed itself in the whole glory of evening light, with all its windows shining.

A flash of real pride and pleasure crossed Celia's smiling face.

‘That is La Tour Blanche,’ she said. ‘Don’t you think that it was worth restoring?’

As they drove down into the valley, and along the village street, they passed a number of caravans and small carts drawn up beside the road. The Corbeau Blanc seemed to be stirring, and full of business : a great noise of hammering made the horses prance and dash round the corner to the bridge ; groups of strange people were standing about ; the eyes that stared at the carriage were ruder and less friendly than usual. Only here and there a passing villager took off his hat to Madame la Marquise, and Vincent smiled at the marked way in which she returned these bows.

‘To-morrow is the fête of our village,’

she explained to him ; ‘ that is why you see all these people.’

‘ And do you go to Mass at the church here ?’

Celia flushed a little : perhaps she thought the question was meant to remind her of Woolsborough and the Cathedral.

‘ I have no doubt you blame me, Vincent,’ she said deliberately ; ‘ but for my part, I never could see much difference between one form of Christianity and another.’

‘ Won’t you have to confess that remark ?’

‘ Nonsense ! Of course, I think now that this is right ; at any rate, I am quite sure it is right for me. It adds to the separation. I’m sorry ; but that is other people’s fault, not mine. I don’t wish that it should, nor does Achille. But he

would not be half so happy if I did not agree with him ; so I think my choice was right.'

'No doubt it was,' said Vincent. 'You did quite the most reasonable thing. What does the separation matter to you? You have got a pretty avenue here, madame.'

'Yes, it is lovely now,' she said, evidently glad to escape from the religious question.

Three minutes later they were standing on the terrace in front of the stately old house, where Antoinette had brought the dogs out to receive them. Vincent was formally introduced to Mdlle. de Montmirail, who curtsied, and gave him her finger-tips gracefully. She was prepared to admire the soldier cousin, but found this impossible ; in her opinion and that of Suzanne, who was not far off, his appearance was hideous ; fierce, rude, wicked, and altogether

disagreeable. How such a man could be a friend of her charming stepmother was indeed mysterious ; and this mystery never became clear to Antoinette.

The old dog who was lying beside her got up and went forward to sniff at Vincent, then turned away with the slightest growl. Another dog, very like this one, pricked his ears and slunk away towards the house ; only the little terrier, Rataplan, was ready to make friends with him.

‘Why, where did you get these Clumbers ?’ asked Vincent, looking with interest at the other dogs. ‘Are they the fashion in France ? One so seldom sees them now.’

‘Don’t you remember them in Surrey ?’ said Celia. ‘Here, Di !’

And the old dog crept slowly forward to be stroked by her, avoiding Vincent as far as possible.

‘Surrey? Of course. Colonel Ward had a whole pack of them.’

‘These are two that he gave me, poor dear! I don’t care for them very much. I want to get a poodle. But old Di is a privileged person, and it is supposed that a poodle would make her unhappy.’

‘She won’t live much longer,’ said Vincent consolingly; and then he added, with his slight grin which did duty for a smile, ‘I remember kicking one of those Clumbers once, when Colonel Ward wasn’t looking. I rather think it was Di, and that she remembers it too.’

‘*Quel homme, mon Dieu! quelle horreur!*’ thought Mdlle. de Montmirail as she went out of that calm golden evening into the lighted house, with her stepmother and the English cousin.



CHAPTER IV.

A PILGRIM IN TOURAINÉ.

THAT most mysterious and magical of palaces, the Château de Chenonceaux—the home once of Diane de Poitiers, and afterwards of Catherine de Medici, who took it away from her, and who, though she died at Blois, seems to have left her spirit here—stands white and grey and smiling, crowned with gilded vanes and ornaments that glitter in the sun, and looks at itself for ever in its native waters of the Cher. For it has grown up out of the river, this great stately building, four hundred years old ; the river

flows and splashes gently about the solid foundations, strong as rocks, and under the low heavy arches of the long bridge-gallery, which continues the château right across the river to the farther bank. Diane de Poitiers built that bridge ; and the Queen, when she possessed herself of Chenonceaux, thought of finishing off the building with another stately *pavillon* beyond it ; but she died without carrying out this idea.

The avenue, leading somewhat downhill from the village, pauses in a courtly manner at some distance from the front of the château, which faces it, in all the rich and magnificent beauty, without extravagance, of the best Renaissance time. Two great stone sphinxes, looking wonderfully scornful, guard the entrance of the avenue ; then the château is approached across an immense court of yellow gravel ; on one side, in the dis-

tance, are a long range of modern stables ; on the other, a great formal garden, full of roses, lying in the broad sunshine without a tree, with stone walls and flights of steps, extending to a terrace that runs along by the river. And the broad, shallow river glides along, with a green island here and there, and the masses of trees on the farther bank make a green, restful background to the shining château and its *cour d'honneur*.

No doubt there are times in the year when Chenonceaux is gay and noisy enough, and then perhaps it loses its weirdness, while all the display of a present modern world—not much holier, perhaps, than that which went before—comes to invade the atmosphere of Catherine, her works and ways. But one would rather see the place when it is silent and lonely, when floating on its river it seems like a dream, a vision of old

time, magical, sinful, strange, with a fascination all its own, and an evil, enchanting beauty. There is an under-current of musical laughter, with a little sweet mockery, in the only sound that reaches one's ears, the ripple and splash of the river against the old stones. 'I am very old, very wicked, and very beautiful,' Chenonceaux seems to say. 'Here in the lonely country, close to my quiet village, hidden by my trees, I have had a history to startle the daylight of your modern minds. Diane, Catherine—beauty and witchcraft—I shall bear their stamp for ever. And the Revolution spared me, while hundreds of old Christian houses were burning, and the blood of their owners was flowing on the scaffold.'

An English traveller, one Saturday afternoon in May, was leaning idly on the parapet wall by the river, gazing at Chenonceaux,

and listening to some enchanting talk of this kind. He found himself rather a rare bird in those parts. He had been in the West, then in the East, and had met other English travellers everywhere. In Spain, his last hunting-ground, they were not so many ; and here they seemed to have totally disappeared. He had come up from Bordeaux to Tours, and had found himself attracted by a part of the world quite new to him, and which yet, somehow, had associations : he had now lingered a fortnight in this Touraine country, visiting Blois, the stately château and charming, friendly old town ; Chambord, mourning alone in her forest ; Amboise, high and sunny, a smiling ruin bright with flowers ; Chaumont, quaint and grand, with round towers looking down over the broad Loire ; and now at last he had come to Chenonceaux, certainly the most

curious and beautiful of all, though the ancient royalty had departed from her more utterly than from any of the others.

The French came to see these old châteaux; they were to be met with everywhere: prettily-dressed ladies; large *bourgeois* families; priests conducting a flock of boys; but there were no English to be met in this part of France; and the lonely traveller rejoiced, though he wondered. It pleased him that these good French people, whom he liked in spite of all their vagaries, and who liked him, should take such a lively interest in their own history, haunting the royal houses that half the world had forgotten, and listening in a meek excursionist spirit to everything they were told.

This traveller had now been several years away from England, and during his absence

he had not thought much of his own country, or of the few interests he had left behind him there. Among new scenes, and ways, and people, he had to a certain extent forgotten the past. He had gone away with a wounded spirit and a sore heart, having been changed rather suddenly from a romantic boy into a disappointed man ; and the news, which had reached him just as he was leaving England, that the woman he loved was likely to marry a man he had almost called his friend, had not improved his opinion of human nature. Everything seemed to be against him ; he had lost his only real old friend, and so he determined to shake the dust of it all off his feet, and to stay away from England for at least ten years.

He went to America, which strengthened him, though he hated it ; and then to Australia, which he hated more ; and then

to the East, which he loved, for he found there a miraculous power of soothing, an indifference to all the ills of life, which he was only too glad to learn. And now, with the half-Oriental look of an Englishman who loves the East, with a quietness which was perfectly strong and self-dependent, with a thin, sunburnt face, a dark beard, only his slight active figure unchanged, Paul Romaine was coming slowly home, month by month finding himself a little nearer England.

After all, it was not five years since he went away ; but to him they seemed ‘ years of years ’ ; and as he leaned there on the parapet of Chenonceaux, he was thinking that there was really no reason why he should not be back at Red Towers in a week. Yet there was no hurry ; more things to see in this country, no doubt ; and as to Paris, he was determined to pass through

without stopping. Of all the cities he had seen in his life, he hated Paris most.

Then he fell to thinking what old friends he should find in England, when he got back there. Well, at Red Towers, except the Vicar, there was no one. He wondered, half smiling, whether he could make anything of the Vicar. The old servants might perhaps be glad to see him ; Scamp, if he was alive still ; the only other person likely to take an interest in him was Dr. Graves, who had thought him a terrible fool for flying off as he did. The Percivals ? No, he felt now that he could not trust Mrs. Percival ; she must have known all along, to some extent, that Celia was deceiving him. And perhaps now the Canon was a Bishop—‘just the sort of man,’ Paul thought wickedly—and the Palace doors would open gingerly to a savage like himself.

Paul wondered, in a lazy, philosophic way, whether there were many people with so few friends. In the course of his travels he had of course met with several people who had taken a fancy to him, and for the time had conquered his unsociable tendencies ; but none of these acquaintances had had time to grow into friendship. Besides, he had lost his old idealizing power, or at least it seemed so ; he did not quite believe that anyone could like him. The goodness of human nature had become something of a dream to him ; he had a sad way, now, of inquiring into people's motives. This Celia had taught him.

He was quite conscious now of being in Celia's country ; not far, perhaps, from her home. He remembered the name of the château—*La Tour Blanche*. It had struck him by its odd likeness to the name of his

own house ; but he did not remember if he had ever heard what town it was near, or in which direction he was likely to come upon it. There was no danger, at any rate, as long as he was in Touraine. M. de Montmirail had certainly told him that Anjou was his province.

Danger? Yes ; he certainly would rather not meet Celia again, though after all, if such a thing happened, it would not matter much to him. What nonsense it all was ! People were always having these troubles and getting over them, and meeting their old loves again quite agreeably, not exactly as strangers or as friends. Looking calmly back, it was all very absurd : one had made one's self so miserable about nothing. Why should a pretty, worthless woman be able to throw a shadow over one's whole life ? But even as Paul thought these wise thoughts,

he told himself that there never was, and never would be, a woman half so attractive as Celia. Paul was a person of fancies, and it seemed to him that there was some likeness, some odd connection, between Chenonceaux and his old love. Beautiful, smiling, cold, with something at once attractive and repellent. Yes, Chenonceaux was the sort of house that ought to have belonged to Celia.

After a long time, Paul was startled from his dream by human footsteps not far off. He looked round, and would not have been surprised if Celia herself had come walking towards him across the glowing gravel. But it was only a peasant woman carrying a basket. She was enough to rouse the traveller, however, and to remind him that time was flying. He stood upright, taking a long last look at the picture before him; the great white walls,

white turrets, peaked grey roofs, and flashing vanes ; the broad river as it ran slowly, and danced and sparkled in the sun ; it all smiled enchantingly, yet with a sweet indifference, as Celia used to smile. Paul turned away from it, crossed the garden, and went out into the court, and then on up the avenue into the village, hardly looking back.

Le Bon Laboureur welcomed him, and he lingered there a little, buying a quantity of photographs and bits of Blois *faïence*, half wishing to stay all night at the pretty little inn, among all its gay French art and pink geraniums. But as there was nothing to do but to go back to the château and dream over it again, he thought he might as well go back to Tours. Even then he nearly missed his train, for he walked down the open country road to the station, and stopped

to pick some rare wild-flowers in a field by the roadside.

Sunburnt and dusty, he sprang into the train just as it was starting, and by those few minutes of hurry he overtook his life, and finished his years of independent wandering. For the 'divinity that shapes our ends' so shaped his, that he was brought face to face with Celia's husband.

When Paul looked up, the Marquis de Montmirail was sitting opposite to him, smiling kindly, though a little flushed and confused by the sudden recognition.





CHAPTER V.

‘MOIS DE MARIE.’

ANTOINETTE was very much disappointed that her father did not come home on Saturday. It had flashed across her mind that she might write to him and ask him to do so, but then came the feeling that she could not do this without her stepmother's knowledge, and that her stepmother would think it a very odd proceeding. When she saw the detestable cousin, however, she felt sorry that she had not done it in spite of everything. And she was rather lonely all that evening, while Madame de Mont-

mirail and Captain Percival seemed to talk unceasingly of old recollections, from which she was shut out. To be sure, now and then the Marquise remembered her manners so far as smilingly to ask her to excuse them, and perhaps, if the Marquis had been at home, he might have enjoyed talking about England as much as they did ; but then Antoinette would not have felt lonely.

There was nothing strange or foreign in being alone with her stepmother, as she often happened to be. Celia was generally a very pleasant companion ; she had a great power of adapting herself to circumstances, and to the ideas and ways of the country she lived in. Dress, food, religion, manners—everything came easily to Celia, her convictions not being deep on any of these subjects. Achille, for a man, was in-

clined to be *dérot*, and she humoured him in this, as in everything else. Considering that she was a convert, and not a very zealous one, the way in which she kept up Catholic observances was a credit to the Montmirail family.

But this was a change in Celia for which her cousin Vincent was by no means prepared. He had never idealized her, like Paul Romaine ; had never been impressed by her angel look as she listened to a sermon in Woolsborough Cathedral. He was therefore a good deal startled when, after dinner on Saturday evening, Pierre threw open the salon door and announced :

‘ *La chapelle est prête.* ’

He and his cousin were sitting in two great brown and gold arm-chairs, talking about England. There was an indefinable something in his way of lounging and talk-

ing which offended Mdlle. Antoinette almost beyond endurance ; she sat as far off as possible, her dark bright head, in the light of the lamp, bent over some hoods for village babies, at which she stitched away hard. She longed for her father ; though no doubt he would behave with perfect kindness to this Englishman—the creature could hardly have things all his own way, if he were there. She remembered a legend of her grandmother, who had once asked a rude man if the house belonged to him. The recollection of that dear grandmother brought up a crowd of old traditions, and deepened the proud resentment with which the young French girl regarded the free-and-easy Englishman.

‘He is not agreeable,’ she thought. ‘One might forgive him for being badly brought up, if he was agreeable. But he

speaks ill of everybody, and sneers at everything, without being clever in the least. He is insupportable.'

When Pierre came in with his announcement, she got up, laid down her work, and looked across the room to her stepmother, who smiled a little consciously, and looked at Vincent.

'I thought French people didn't have family prayers,' he said, as he lay back in his chair. He looked from Celia to Antoinette, but she did not look at him.

'Not that exactly, you know,' said Celia, for once a little confused; it was not nice to be laughed at by Vincent, of all people, when she particularly wanted him to feel the superiority of her lot in life and all its arrangements. 'It is the "*Mois de Marie*."' '

'Oh, really I beg your pardon! I am

very ignorant. And must you attend this —this function—yourself? Or can’t you stay and talk to me?’

‘No, I can’t. You had better come too. It will not hurt you,’ said Celia.

‘No, madame, excuse me,’ he said. ‘Unless you insist, we will draw the line at the “Mois de Marie.” Besides, I should be thought a walking profanation.’

After this he condescended to get up, and to hold the door open for the ladies, while they threw shawls over their heads and went out to the chapel. He followed them out of the room, and lighted a cigarette on the terrace, in the warm still starlight. He saw them go under the old archway into the lighted chapel, a few other figures following them. After standing out there a few minutes, he walked slowly and softly to the end of the terrace, and mounted the worn

stone steps, to where a narrow ray of light fell from the low arch of the chapel door ; somebody had left it a few inches open. Vincent walked like a cat—it was one of his accomplishments, being as lithe as he was strong—and standing on the step, was able to look in and listen. The little chapel was very old, older than the rest of the house, with a low, vaulted stone roof and narrow windows. The carved stone altar glittered with lights in silver candlesticks ; it had a covering of blue silk and lace, and was loaded with flowers, of which large pots stood also all round it on the floor—roses, geraniums, marguerites. On the wall above hung pictures of saints. In front, a red carpet was laid down, and there was room for about a dozen *prie-Dieu* chairs, at which the ladies and the servants were kneeling. A sweet young voice was reading the

prayers of the ‘Mois de Marie,’ very fast, in a high monotone ; now and then came a fine growl of responses. It was Antoinette who was reading : Celia knelt silently beside her, with her face hidden.

‘*Souvenez-vous, O très pieuse Vierge Marie——*’ the young voice went ringing on ; and suddenly, for one mysterious moment, the listener felt himself what he had suggested that other people might think him—a walking profanation.

He went lightly down the steps, and walked off along the terrace. Having pulled himself together, and lighted another cigarette, he wondered very much how Celia could have given herself up to a life of such confounded humbug.

On the whole, the thing put him rather out of temper, and when the ladies came back into the salon, he was inclined to be

silent and sulky. This lasted till about half-past nine, when Mdlle. Antoinette went away to bed, thus relieving him of what he felt a sort of restraint, for he was conscious of her dislike, and inclined to return it.

Then Celia became industrious, which was a little tiresome. She moved herself into the lamplight, and began working at a large piece of silk embroidery. Certainly she made a very pretty picture, sitting there in a soft circle of light : a more attractive picture, to many eyes, than Antoinette with her hoods. Her cousin, however, sat and stared at her in a discontented sort of way. She was perhaps happier than he wished to see her. He could not quite understand her, or the reason of it all. On the whole, now, he was a good deal fonder of himself than of her—self-love being a plant which richly rewards cultivation—but still she was

a most interesting study, and he wanted to ask her a great many questions. He was only checked by the faint instinct that told him she would not like these questions ; and even now, perhaps, his curiosity—a form of self-indulgence—might insist on being gratified in spite of any warning instinct.

‘Why do you work?’ he said, with a touch of impatience. ‘Can’t you do nothing, and talk to me?’

‘No ; I want to finish this,’ said Celia calmly. ‘You must amuse me. Tell me about India ; I can listen.’

‘I shall do no such thing,’ he said.

A slight smile lingered about Celia’s lips as she bent over her work. Vincent was so utterly unchanged, so ridiculously like his old self. Every word, every frown, every irritable twist in his chair, reminded

her vividly of that old summer at Woolsborough, when it used to be her business to charm his cross tempers away, and when, without a thought, all through those sunny weeks, of any serious consequence, she used to enjoy the fun of feeling her power over him.

She had not much heart, even then ; but in truth she was a better woman then than now. Her way had been downhill, though her sins had not been very great ones, as the world would see them. But perhaps the inward degradation, the falseness to one's self, the playing with life and love and duty, with no better object than outward comfort and peace and amusement, may in the end bring down a soul to a very low depth. There may be more hope for people who have been carried away by a madness of passion, and so have forgotten the honour due to themselves, than for a

practical, self-preserving, loveless creature like Celia.

She had a little thrill of amused excitement, as she sat there working, and knew that her influence over Vincent was in fact just as strong as ever. He did not know it, but she did ; and even while she thought him a fool for his pains, she liked him intensely, and was conscious of a thought which came of itself—and to do her justice, was not dwelt upon :

‘ After all, I ought to have married him.’

Then she reminded herself of what she had always known—that he would have been a tyrant. No, it was all for the best ; an ill-tempered man would be a terrible bore to live with ; and Achille was simply the perfection of a husband. He adored her ; and most certainly she was quite contented with him.

‘Do you think Antoinette pretty?’ she asked presently, with an idea of turning Vincent’s thoughts and talk away from herself.

‘Yes—rather,’ he said carelessly. ‘Very French; too dark. Those sort of eyes and hair are uninteresting—to me, at least. I suppose she is like her father. How old is she—sixteen?’

‘She is eighteen,’ said Celia.

‘Really! A stepdaughter nearly as old as yourself. She is very childish for her age. Is that your arrangement?’

Celia laughed.

‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘It is the way with French girls. But——’

‘Married out of the nursery. When is she going to be married? Ah, my manners are very bad. You were saying something.’

‘I was going to tell you,’ said Celia,

'that she is not like her father at all. Has nobody told you what he is like? It seems so odd that you have never seen him.'

'Romaine picked him up first, didn't he? That was very queer,' said Vincent; and then he covered this remark with a laugh. 'Well, what are the looks of M. le Marquis?—No; nobody told me. I didn't ask.'

'Look at that photograph on the table close to you,' said Celia.

Vincent snatched up a brass frame, out of which Achille de Montmirail, broad, fair, handsome, the picture of honesty and good-humour, looked him straight in the face with wide-open eyes. He held it in his hand for a minute or two, then put it quietly down.

'He is not much like a Frenchman,' he said.

‘He is a thorough Frenchman of the best kind,’ said Celia. ‘But you Englishmen know nothing whatever about them.’

‘Very likely not. He is a good-looking man, at any rate.’

‘When he was quite young, people thought him the handsomest man in France,’ said the Marquise, with a shade of satisfaction.

‘His looks may be called good in another sense, too,’ said Vincent, not unpleasantly.

‘And what his looks are, he is,’ she said.

‘The fact is, Madame la Marquise thinks herself a lucky woman.’

‘No one will venture to tell her that she is anything else.’

‘I don’t suppose anyone will,’ said Vincent. ‘There is one thing more certain, though——’

‘What may that be?’

‘That M. le Marquis is a lucky man. An English beauty, an English heiress—it is not every Frenchman who makes such a catch as that. It entitles him to the everlasting hate of all Englishmen. I should like a war between England and France. I should like to command the regiment that takes your village, and to have the pleasure of looking on while this house is burnt down. Set it on fire myself, perhaps! that would be a grand revenge.’

Celia laughed. ‘Horrid, ungrateful wretch!’ she said. ‘But you would not find it so easy to set this house on fire. The walls are at least two yards thick.’

‘Oh, it should burn, it should burn!’ said Vincent, and his eyes ran round the room as if in search of the most inflammable corner.

‘Ungrateful, you say! And pray what have I to be grateful for?’

‘For a much better dinner than you would have had at River Gate,’ Celia answered lightly.

‘Well, you are right. And I appreciated that, I assure you. Still, even at River Gate, there is a change for the better in the cook line. What a barbarous monster my mother had that summer, do you remember? She could cook nothing but “rosbif.” Do you still like “rosbif”?’

‘I never liked it,’ said Celia. ‘I hate English cookery. Perhaps that was why I married a Frenchman.’

‘It is the only reason that seems at all reasonable,’ said her cousin. ‘If I married a Frenchwoman, I’m afraid it wouldn’t answer in the same way. But what a thing, to be sure of a good dinner for the

rest of your life! Somehow, Celia—to change the subject—you have not developed as I expected you would. You have, of course, but in a different way.'

'Developed! What do you mean?'

'I always thought, that if you could ever do exactly what you pleased, you would turn out rather a dashing sort of woman—if not fast, horsey. I expected you to smoke, too. I am astonished to find you living quietly in this lonely sort of place, with nobody to amuse you but a girl, and nothing to do but needlework and devotions. Your adopted country would let you live a much jollier life than that, I know. You might be in Paris, as gay as anyone else, and down here you might do anything on earth you pleased. I expected you to meet me to-day at the station in a high cart, driving tandem and smoking a cigarette. Isn't that the sort of

thing you would like ? Instead of that, you are the pink of propriety in a carriage and pair. Isn't it very slow ?

‘Anything for a quiet life,’ said Celia, smiling over her work.

‘So it seems ; but do you really think so ?’

‘I am older, wiser, lazier than when you knew me, Vincent,’ she said. ‘There are lots of people like me ; they want to do things when they can't, and they don't do them when they can. Besides, some men are old-fashioned enough to hate all that sort of thing for their wives, and my husband is one of them. So now you know.’

‘Is it that you won't, or can't ?’

‘I could, but I don't care to attempt it. I should lose more than I should gain. He and his family are satisfied with me as I am.’

‘And you like to be admired for a sort

of character you don't possess. What an actress you are !

‘ And what a cousin you are ! ’ said Celia, with perfect coolness and good-humour. ‘ Suppose we talk about something more interesting ? ’

‘ Certainly. Have you yet arranged a marriage for Miss Antoinette ? ’

‘ Does that interest you ? No, indeed, we have not thought about it. Antoinette will not have much fortune, poor child ! I am afraid it will be a difficulty. ’

‘ Why ? she is the only child. ’

‘ Yes, ’ said Celia. ‘ But her father had very little indeed of his own. Just this house, and not much land with it. Her mother's fortune was small, too ; she was one of a large family ; it was a foolish marriage. And my money, you know—well, you must understand that I am quite

independent. We married with *séparation de biens*. Everything I have is entirely my own ; and as a good deal of my money has been spent on restoring this house, it is settled on me for my life. Anyhow, a certain part of my husband's property comes to me by law.'

'On the whole, a very comfortable arrangement for you,' said Vincent, 'especially as you are sure to survive him.'

Celia looked a little grave. She stooped down to examine the shades in her work, then said, without looking up :

'He is a good many years older than I am ; but I hope I shall not survive him. He deserves to live a hundred years.'

'You are much more likely to live a hundred years,' said Vincent. 'One does not quite see why people like you should ever die. I always thought that such a

remarkable thing about you—that you should never have had even a finger-ache. You are not going to bed ?

She was putting aside her silks, and rolling up her work with quiet, deliberate movements.

‘ Yes,’ she said. ‘ I am tired, and so are you, no doubt.’

She was again the stately young Marquise who had met him at the station ; not the girl who long ago, in the old inn garden by the river, had objected to being told that she knew nothing of pain. She gave him her hand with an air which was not exactly friendliness ; it seemed meant to remind him, very gently, that he had his limits, and might as well keep to them ; the personal talk he was so fond of might go too far. They were not quite on the old River Gate terms, kind and hospitable as she might be.

He wished her good-night half sulkily. He afterwards reflected that if she chose to give herself airs, he would go away to-morrow ; but then curiosity said he must see her husband, this man for whom, with all her coldness, she was certainly a little sensitive.

END OF VOL. II.

MONTHLY, ONE SHILLING.

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